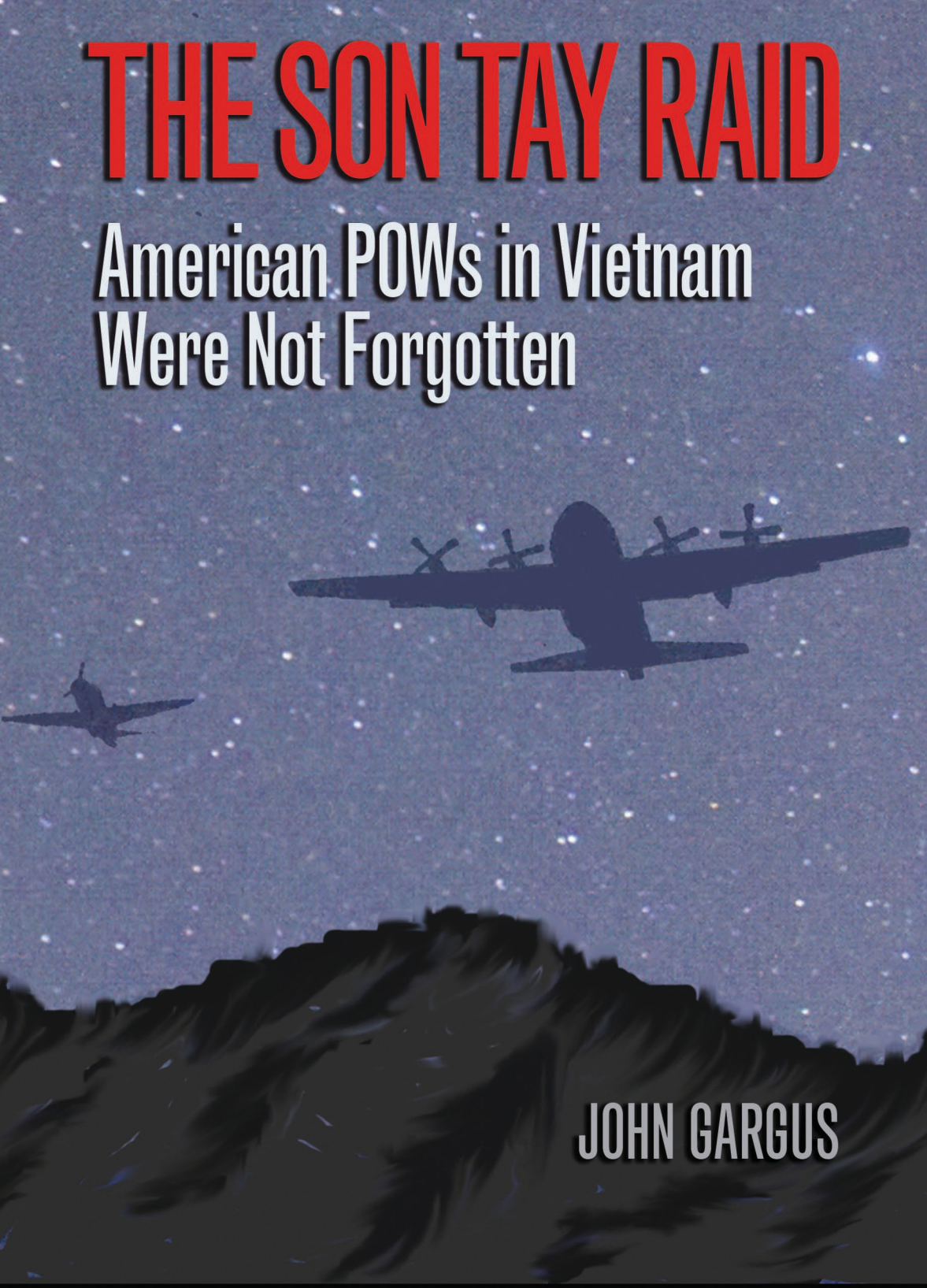
THE SON TAY RAID

American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten



JOHN GARGUS

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THE SON TAY RAID

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American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten

Revised Edition

JOHN GARGUS

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To

the Son Tay raiders

and to the U.S.

prisoners of war in Vietnam

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Preface

Previously published books and articles about the Son Tay raid focus on the precision with which it was carried out and praise it as a brilliant joint military tactical operation in spite of its failure to free the U.S. prisoners of war. It turned out that this daring attempt was not in vain because its sheer boldness rekindled hope for the prisoners and brought about better treatment for them from their startled North Vietnamese captors. Obviously, such a gutsy incursion deep into the heartland of the enemy required dedicated men whose mission had to be meticulously planned and rehearsed. Those of us who were directly involved in it harbor vivid memories of that TOP SECRET operation. Unfortunately, but for very valid reasons, we were not at liberty to discuss our roles in the raid until after many years had elapsed. By then our raid no longer rated front-page coverage from the media. The story about the raid remained primarily an interesting subject for instruction in all of our military schools. Now, the surviving Son Tay raiders finally speak up. This fact is important to remember while reading this book because, from their perspective, their accounts tell the rest of the Son Tay raid story.

Without any doubt the first and best-documented story about the Son Tay raid was written by Benjamin F. Schemmer in 1976. Ben was at that time the editor and publisher of *Armed Forces Journal.* That was an influential position in Washington, and it helped him to cut through many bureaucratic roadblocks in declassifying some of the raid's military secrets. But he was not as successful in obtaining input from the raiders. Most of us were still on active duty on various assignments throughout the world, and the ones he was able to locate would not tell him much. Consequently, his story did not cover the raid from the perspective of those who had to overcome problems in planning, training, and coordinating the raid once the joint task force deployed to Southeast Asia. He did his best to list all the raiders and planners in the appendices of his book, but he could not document their individual contributions to the overall effort.

I became well acquainted with Ben Schemmer's book during my as-

signment to Hurlburt Field in 1976. The Son Tay raid was one of the featured presentations at the Air Force Special Operations School, which was headed by Col. Richard A. Dutton, a former Son Tay inmate. Col. Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, retired deputy commander of the raid's Joint Contingency Task Group (JCTG), was always the main presenter. Because I flew in the raid and participated in the air operations planning, Dutton would call upon me as a ready domestic resource to join Simons whenever he could not get one of the raid's helicopter pilots from the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center at nearby Eglin Air Force Base. As one would expect, Bull Simons dominated every presentation. Nevertheless, I was always impressed by questions about the raid's Air Force and Navy air operations that the audience addressed to me. There was not much information available in print about those phases of the raid, and many questions I had to answer made me realize that I was a living source for the raid's air operations. These Simons-Gargus-Dutton presentations were memorable events for me and eventually caused me to write my own memoirs about the raid.

After many years, the raiders met at Fort Walton Beach, Florida, in 1990 and formed the Son Tay Raid Association. They resolved to join with the former prisoners of war from the Son Tay Camp and meet at reunions every two or three years. They lamented at these gatherings that not enough information existed in print about the most important mission of their lives. They began urging each other to record their stories for posterity and to live up to their association's preamble that charged them to ensure that the raid's lessons as well as the POW experience would not be forgotten and that the bravery, dedication, and true American spirit so aptly demonstrated would be kept alive.

In 2000, the Son Tay Raid Association held a joint Vietnam prisoners of war/Son Tay raider reunion at Sundestin in Florida, at which I handed out some of my air operations recollections and participated in a three-hour seminar with retired Lt. Gen. LeRoy Manor, our JCTG commander, and retired Col. Lawrence Ropka, one of the original Washington planners. Ben Schemmer attended this presentation and contacted me about using some of my information for his forthcoming revised edition of *The Raid.*

My collaboration with Ben Schemmer became very rewarding. He liked my reunion literature about air operations planning, training, and coordination by key staff members in Southeast Asia, as well as my monographs about the participation of Air Force College Eye (EC121 radar platforms)

and the Navy in the raid. He believed that I had enough previously unpublished material to write a separate book. He promised to assist me in its publication and asked me to become one of the authors of a book on U.S. Special Operations Forces that he planned to publish. My rewarding assignment was to write a chapter on the Air Force Special Operations Command. Once this task was completed, I focused on my Son Tay raid book and followed his suggestions to use appropriate vignettes from my many raider colleagues. When I was ready to share my entire manuscript with him, he surprised me with his plan to relocate from Florida to Las Vegas. He asked me not to mail my manuscript to him because we would review it together once we became Nevada neighbors. I was shocked two months later when Ben passed away in October 2003.

The sudden loss of Ben Schemmer left me without a publishing collaborator. We had never even discussed his publication scheme. I anticipated that it would be some kind of coauthorship, just like the one he had with Col. John T. Carney for their book *No Room for Error* on covert operations by our military special forces. Carney was also one of the authors and the managing editor of our collaborative effort entitled *U.S. Special Operations Forces.* The only thing that Ben and I had agreed on in our telephone and e-mail encounters was that my goal in telling the previously unpublished parts of the story was appropriate and attainable, because I was successful in soliciting inputs from just about anyone connected with the raid who could still be located and was willing to provide personal information.

Another coauthor of *U.S. Special Operations Forces,* Col. John M. Collins (USA-Ret.), a respected military historian and a longtime friend of Ben Schemmer, showed interest in my work and offered his assistance. He reviewed my manuscript, offered constructive criticism, and referred me to the editorial staff at the Naval Institute Press. More constructive criticism at the Naval Institute Press followed. My book focused too much on the air operations aspects of the raid. I needed to provide a better balance by including parallel information on what the Green Berets did on the ground. That revision brought me in contact with my Army colleagues. They enriched me with many interesting stories about their ground assault.

My association with the Naval Institute Press ended, in spite of much appreciated assistance from Mark Gatlin, because the editorial staff wanted me to speculate on the failure of our national intelligence network to detect the evacuation of prisoners from Son Tay and on the

alleged intentional landing of one helicopter at a nearby site whose occupants were of non-Vietnamese origin. I chose not to use that faintly "tabloid" method of adding controversial appeal to my work. My book is not about accusations and speculations. I can back up everything in it with quoted sources. I do not have any sources in the intelligence community, and I know that there is no truth to a particular and sinister myth of how troops landed at the military compound near the POW camp. How that helicopter actually got there is well documented in this book.

My progress in writing the book was very slow. I learned that most of my sources did not like to write letters. My telephone conversations with them were expensive and not very productive. They could not readily recall events of so long ago, and we would always drift into chat about other topics of common interest. I succeeded in assembling what is presented in this book because of the popularity of e-mail. Unlike my phone calls, e-mail messages encouraged my sources to be brief and to stick to the questions I asked.

E-mail also helped others interested in my work to step forward. For example: Don Raby found me while he searched for information about the Son Tay raid on the Internet. As a nineteen-year-old sailor he witnessed the Navy's diversion over Haiphong from the deck of the USS *Wainwright* on his first night in the Gulf of Tonkin. He provided me with some names and e-mail addresses of people who he knew were at Yankee Station during the raid. While many individuals passed me from one person to another, I connected with several key participants. Those e-mail contacts and the personnel locator assistance I received from the Navy Payroll Office in Cleveland, Ohio, helped me to find others who assisted me in putting together the Navy's little publicized participation in the raid.

I also connected with several College Eye participants through the Air Force personnel locator at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas. They asked me to document their raid participation in a story they shared with their colleagues at a 2001 reunion of College Eye veterans in Oklahoma City.

Next, Merle Pribbenow, translator of Vietnamese military historical documents, found me in his attempt to locate both Ben Schemmer and Col. Sully Fontaine, a post-raid security investigator for the Army. He became interested in my work on the subject and provided me with translated documents that describe the raid from the enemy's propaganda-laced perspective. His generous input provided most of the material for the last chapter of this book.

I also spent many hours at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, where I looked at every unclassified reference that addressed the raid. I learned that some referenced documents were still classified and that many histories of units barely mentioned their roles in the event. This omission was due to the fact that when the historians recorded current events of their units, the Son Tay raid was classified as a TOP SECRET operation. Raid participants were not at liberty to discuss operational details, and unit historians either did not have sufficient input from them or did not know how to approach such a militarily sensitive subject. Now that practically every aspect of the Son Tay raid has been declassified, the previously unpublished episodes dealing with this joint service operation, including the ones from today's Vietnam, can be presented.

Thanks to all of my constructive critics, this book now focuses on the joint raid training and planning in Florida, necessary coordination with supporting forces in Southeast Asia, the Navy's diversionary action from the Gulf of Tonkin, and the eventual raid execution on the night of 20–21 November 1970. The last chapter focuses on the way the North Vietnamese documented the Son Tay raid for their population. This is another reason why this book represents the previously untold side of the POW rescue story.

The first edition of this book reached many appreciative readers who were interested in the history of the Vietnam War. Surprisingly, I received many comments from individuals pointing out that I had more information from the Navy pilots, who participated in the supporting diversionary operation over the Haiphong area, than from the Air Force pilots who had risked their lives flying over the heavily defended sky over Son Tay. They were correct. There was an imbalance there with which I confronted my Air Force colleagues. They responded by providing recollections that are now recorded in this book. My original 93-page chapter on the Son Tay mission grew to more than 100 pages after including input from F-4 and F-105 air crews. I also located the well-preserved after-action report notes of the Blueboy commander, Dick Meadows. His son Mark let me borrow them, permitting me to expand the Blueboy group's story on the ground inside the POW compound.

My chapter on the Vietnamese account of the raid is also expanded by several pages. I received some fresh translations of North Vietnamese military histories from Merle Pribbenow that hint at why the POWs were moved out of Son Tay. And I also included some amazing intelligence

obtained from captured North Vietnamese soldiers who claimed to have knowledge about the raid. Finally, some American visitors to Son Tay who had read my book sent me more fascinating stories they obtained from local residents who lived there at the time of the raid.

I owe much to many of my colleagues who assisted me and encouraged me in my writing. John M. Collins stepped in when I needed help after the loss of Ben Schemmer. Merle L. Pribbenow surfaced out of nowhere and provided me with everything he could find on the raid from his Vietnamese sources. Lt. Gen. LeRoy J. Manor (USAF-Ret.), who commanded the Joint Contingency Task Group, reviewed my work and provided me with valuable guidance. Other Air Force officers who reviewed various portions of my text were Cols. Richard A. Peshkin and Lawrence Ropka, both retired. One of my recent friends, Lt. Col. Morton Friedlander (Ret.), who was not involved in the raid, reviewed my final text with great attention to detail. On the Army's side I received valuable counsel from retired Cols. Elliott P. Sydnor Jr. and James H. Morris as well as Maj. Daniel D. Turner. My principal collaborator from the Navy was retired Capt. P. D. Hoskins. My son-in-law, Marvin Schlaak, assisted me with computer work on photographs and sketches. All the rest of my colleagues who provided me with valuable personal input are listed in the bibliography. I thank you all for making possible the rest of the Son Tay raid story.

THE SON TAY RAID

Prologue

To appreciate the mindset and patriotism of the men to whom I dedicated this book one should be aware of their soldierly commitment as well as the turbulent domestic environment in which the country found itself while fighting the war in Vietnam.

Television brought the Vietnam War to American living rooms with a daily count of casualties and with commentaries from reporters that grew more and more critical of the perceived futility of our involvement in this distant struggle against global communism. Young men faced the lottery draft and dreaded their uncertain future as they awaited monthly publication of assigned draft numbers. In spite of that, a few dedicated young men enlisted voluntarily. Many others, who felt that it was their duty as citizens to serve, accepted their fate. Some used various legal loopholes to avoid the draft. Finally, there were those who joined the growing numbers of militant war protesters and refused to serve. They either accepted judgments that awaited them as draft dodgers or avoided service by leaving the country. The men in this book were different. They were either professional soldiers or individuals who had made a voluntary commitment to serve in military specialties of their choice. They were the U.S. Army troops who had mastered very rigorous Special Forces training and joined the elite ranks of the Green Berets. The others were Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine airmen who also had to undergo varying degrees of specialized training demanded by the type of aircraft they flew. This group also included those airmen who became prisoners of war and had to endure the harshest of conditions during their long captivity. These men did not waver in their loyalties while they were captives of the enemy, and they served in Vietnam much longer than the normal one-year tour of duty required of their more fortunate colleagues. They were trapped in a torturous, propaganda-filled North Vietnamese environment until their country could find a way to end the war and bring them home.

During the earlier war in Korea, another communist adversary had also captured American soldiers, but in that era soldiers went to battle without having been properly prepared for captivity. Their unscrupulous captors subjected them to subhuman treatment that included, besides deprivation of food and medical aid, brutal torture and incessant indoctrination that became known as brainwashing. After that war, the U.S. armed forces developed a Code of Conduct for soldiers to follow in all future conflicts. In six short articles, it provided comprehensive rules that addressed each soldier's dedication to God and country and provided guidance for conduct on the field of battle and in captivity as prisoners of war. Our soldier president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, understood the need for such a code and approved it in 1955.

The new Code of Conduct and the many lessons learned from the POWs of the Korean War became part of the rigorous training for the soldiers whose actions are described in this book. They all received very realistic survival training, which gave them a taste of what it was like to become a captive of a communist enemy. This training and the Code of Conduct forged a common bond between all members of the U.S. military, including myself, and the unfortunate prisoners. Their freedom became the most important mission of our military careers.

This is the text of the United States Military Code of Conduct:

> Article 1: I am an American, fighting in the armed forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.
>
> Article 2: I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.
>
> Article 3: If I am captured, I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.
>
> Article 4: If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information nor take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.
>
> Article 5: When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will

make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

Article 6: I will never forget that I am an American, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

The men who provided accounts for this book were dedicated to this code and understood that the comrades they intended to rescue had lived up to its challenges under the most difficult circumstances. All were also willing to risk becoming POWs themselves should they fail in their daring effort to free the prisoners.

One man they hoped to free was Air Force captain Wes Schierman, who was shot down on August 27, 1965 and later imprisoned at Son Tay. When the door of the prison slammed shut behind him, he realized that he was beginning a new type of war. He recalled his POW survival training at Stead AFB and resolved to follow four personal guidelines: 1. Be military; 2. Don't discuss or argue politics; 3. Don't ask for anything, and; 4. Follow the Code of Conduct. He wrote the following in a very touching story about his long life in captivity:

I never mentioned the "Code of Conduct" to the interrogators, but would instead argue that I was bound by the "Geneva Conventions." However, the "Code" was the "Rule Book" for the POWs. I had made up my mind that I would rather not return home than to return having dishonored myself, my family, and my country![1]

One of the 566 POWs who was released from captivity in 1973 smuggled out the regulations of his camp that its authorities had given them in February 1967. The camp authorities treated each prisoner as a criminal and expected all to comply with very stringent rules that governed their daily conduct. They used these regulations to excuse the harsh treatment of their captives. If a prisoner refused to provide information on military intelligence, on his personal background, or on the way the POWs communicated with each other, his interrogators would label him a criminal who broke this or that published camp regulation. It was easy for the guards and interrogators to point out noncompliance with any number of petty rules and use that as an excuse for brutal treatment and punishment. Out of the many camp rules, the following ones challenged the commitments American soldiers made to the Code of Conduct:

The criminals are under an obligation to give full and clear written or oral answers to all questions raised by the camp authorities. All attempts and tricks intended to evade answering further questions and acts directed to opposition by refusing to answer any questions will be considered manifestations of obstinacy and antagonism, which deserve strict punishment. [See Article 5 on the limitation of information a POW could provide to the enemy.]

Any obstinacy or opposition, violation, or any scheme or attempt to get out of the detention camp without permission are all punishable. On the other hand any criminal who strictly obeys the camp regulations and shows his true submission and repentance by his practical acts will be allowed to enjoy the humane treatment he deserves. [See Article 3 on resisting the enemy and accepting special favors.]

Anyone so imbued with a sense of preventing violations and who reveals the identity of those who attempt to act in violation of the forgoing [*sic*] provisions will be properly rewarded. However, if any criminal is aware of any violation and deliberately tries to cover it up, he will be strictly punished when this is discovered. In order to assure [*sic*] the proper execution of the regulations, all the criminals must be held in a detention room. [See Article 3 on accepting special favors and Article 4 on causing harm to fellow prisoners.]

In order to assure [*sic*] the proper execution of the regulations, all the criminals in any detention room must be held responsible for any and all violations of the regulations committed in their room. [See Article 6 on individual responsibility.]

He or who [*sic*] escapes or tries to escape from the camp and his (their) accomplice(s) will be seriously punished. [See Article 2 on efforts to escape.][2]

The number of prisoners held by North Vietnam became a big issue in the Paris peace negotiations when the U.S. delegate, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., called for prompt POW talks during the very first session in January 1969. President Nixon's administration continued to press this issue not only in Paris but also at home, focusing American attention on the plight of our soldiers who kept their faith and continued to resist the enemy while in captivity. Cultures clashed over the status of prisoners of war. The North Vietnamese did not consider wartime captivity to be an honorable condition that warranted public solidarity and sympathy. They did not share our

high regard for soldiers who became prisoners of war; nevertheless, they were cunning enough to use America's continued concern for its soldiers as leverage in the negotiations. The North Vietnamese avoided compliance with the Geneva Convention in their treatment of prisoners and declined to provide information on their names and numbers. They regarded them as criminals who committed bombing atrocities against their civilian population in an undeclared war. As such, many POWs were tortured during their interrogations. Interrogators forced them to write incriminating confessions and threatened them with trials as criminal pirates. On one occasion, in July 1966, fifty-two American POWs were forced to walk through the streets of Hanoi, where agitated crowds were allowed to attack and abuse them. On the other hand, journalists from sympathizing countries, including some peace activists and celebrities from the United States, were allowed to visit and photograph the POWs in favorable settings that were designed to counter well-known claims about their harsh treatment. Reliable information about the life of American airmen was available from intelligence sources and from several POWs whom the North Vietnamese had released for goodwill and for propaganda purposes.

By 1970 the Department of Defense knew that there were at least 350 American POWs in eleven North Vietnamese camps. Everyone expected this count to be substantially larger because of the number of aircraft losses and airmen listed as missing in action (MIA). Were so many of them perishing in captivity? The number of POWs and MIAs held in makeshift jungle camps in South Vietnam and Laos was smaller and less defined. These jungle camps were small, often holding only a few captives who were moved frequently from one location to another.

The growing number of MIAs and POWs was hard on their families. Only a few had information on the status of their loved ones, especially on those who were suspected of being held in South Vietnam or Laos. Unlike the captured airmen who were shot down flying over the North, those in the South and in Laos were captured in ground encounters and were far removed from the more permanently established internment facilities in North Vietnam. POWs in the North had opportunities to be seen and photographed by occasional visitors from sympathetic anti-war groups who would make their identities known to the outside world. On rare occasions, some were allowed to send censored letters home with visiting anti-war groups.

Families of POWs and MIAs organized and lobbied their senators, congressional representatives, and the Department of Defense for some ac-

tion to address the plight of their loved ones. Supporters at home would buy special POW/MIA bracelets that bore the names of individuals and the dates of their suspected capture. Concerned Nixon administration officials and the Department of Defense paid special attention to the families and communicated with them as often as possible. In turn, families that were fortunate enough to receive letters from the POWs would make them available to intelligence specialists, who would often find hidden messages in their texts. They learned much about the POWs and how they used ingenious ways to pass valuable information about their camps.

Learning the location of North Vietnamese POW camps continued to be a high priority for the Department of Defense. Were they at permanent military installations or in proximity to other significant military targets? Would the POWs be out of harm's way in targeted bombing assaults? Most camps were found to be in populated areas, and only one, near a provincial capital called Son Tay, was fairly isolated and away from the busy activity of normal country life.

Attempted POW rescues from South Vietnamese camps were quite frequent and always unsuccessful. They did not free a single American soldier even though U.S. forces promptly raided all newly discovered jungle camps. They would always find them to have been recently abandoned. It soon became very clear that the communists had agents at various levels of the South Vietnamese armed forces who compromised the American rescue plans. The discovery of empty bamboo cages provided grim testimony about the inhumane treatment of the POWs in these jungle locations.

A raid to free American POWs from North Vietnam would be far more challenging. It would require a daring invasion of North Vietnam that would be extremely hazardous as a military operation and would involve unprecedented political and international risks for the United States, which was already divided over the direction of the war. At that time the U.S. armed forces did not have ready-trained ground and air assets that could even attempt such a feat.

But the discovery of the fairly isolated POW camp near Son Tay and the compelling desire of the Department of Defense to do something about the plight of the POWs would change things. Why not try a POW rescue from North Vietnam? What would be the political and military risks? The Department of Defense was willing to try it. Would the president go along with it? That was the mindset in Washington in the summer of 1970.

] CHAPTER ONE [

Raid Conception

The shocking and bold plan to rescue American prisoners of war from North Vietnam required a unique, specially trained joint military task force and approval from the president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon. Military leaders assembled the best available Army and Air Force volunteers in Florida for training in utmost secrecy, half a world away from those who suffered deprivation, brainwashing, and torture in enemy captivity. The prisoner of war camp selected for this rescue was near Son Tay, twenty-three miles west of North Vietnam's capital of Hanoi. It was in the most heavily defended area of the country, close to MIG interceptor air bases, and carefully positioned antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missile sites. The raid planners had information that this camp held about sixty Air Force and Navy airmen who had survived being shot down on missions over the enemy's territory.

Feasibility Study

In May 1970, a small group of intelligence officials at the Air Force's 1127th Field Activities Group at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, concluded from reconnaissance photographs and other fragmentary information that there was a prisoner of war camp near the North Vietnamese town of Son Tay. They were equally convinced that this camp's POWs were trying to communicate with U.S. reconnaissance aircraft by the way they arranged their laundry and how they marked the ground surface inside their compound. The prisoners were sending signals. This startling discovery was brought to the attention of Brig. Gen. James R. Allen, Deputy Director for Plans and Policy in the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations, who was in a position to follow up on it. He was delighted to learn about this find and turned to his favorite covert operations planner, Col. Norman H. Frisbie, with instructions to isolate himself in a secure

place and come up with a quick assessment of our military capability to execute such a mission.[1]

Colonel Frisbie was from the Air Force Plans and Policy Directorate. He explored the capabilities of available aircraft that could do the job and concluded that a rescue attempt could be made with a relatively small number of ground troops and a few Jolly Green Giant helicopters. His boss liked the idea and took it to Brig. Gen. Donald D. Blackburn, who was the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA). Blackburn was excited about this unexpected opportunity to make a positive impact on the Vietnam War, and he convened a fifteen-member feasibility study group on 10 June 1970 to conduct initial planning for the raid.[2] The code name for this phase of the POW rescue planning was Operation Polar Circle. He anticipated having a member of his immediate staff chair this group, but his intended officer already had well-established vacation plans. Blackburn could not wait until that staff member became available, so he designated Frisbie as chief of the Joint Feasibility Study Group. This group included representatives from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps.

The initial feasibility concepts had the Army and the Air Force going their separate ways on getting the raiders to Son Tay. Senior Army officers were serious in advocating the use of Bell Helicopter UH-1Hs for this operation in spite of their short range and limited load capability at higher altitudes. They envisioned staging them from various Special Forces sites in Laos that were much closer to Son Tay than bases in Thailand. The Air Force focused on Sikorsky HH-53s, the Super Jolly Green Giants, which were faster and capable of much larger payloads. They had an unlimited range because they could be refueled in the air as often as necessary. Blackburn was well aware of their capabilities from his prior assignment as chief of the clandestine Studies and Observation Group (SOG) in Saigon. Maj. Jim Morris, who would become the Special Forces plans officer once the raider force assembled in Florida, had prior operational experience with the HH-53s in Laos. Their views prevailed and the initial planning focused on using the Super Jolly Green Giants. But the UH-1Hs did not fall by the wayside. A small helicopter, the size of Bell Helicopter's Huey, was needed to land the troops inside the POW compound.[3]

Mission security had to be perfect for the raid to materialize. Any leak of the planned POW rescue could result in a deadly ambush for the raiders. Recently promoted Lt. Col. Larry Ropka, who was the most ex-

perienced special air operations planner and the raid's most enthusiastic advocate, feared for its fate if the planning were to be accomplished in the bowels of the Pentagon. Ropka knew from his prior experiences that something with that much impact on the Vietnam War should not be planned from there. Even with a small number of participants, word of the operation would spread and increase the probability of leaks. Blackburn agreed, and the initial fifteen-member feasibility study group was sent to work in the Defense Intelligence Agency's facility at Arlington Hall Station. This isolation of key planners continued so that the numbers of interested, curious, and nonessential Pentagon individuals were effectively limited and very carefully controlled.

Another early decision advocated by Ropka was to use internal military counterintelligence resources to monitor the activities of all raiders and officials who would get briefed on the rescue plan. Study group members contacted their respective services in search of qualified individuals and put together a joint counterintelligence team that exceeded everyone's expectations.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Approval

When Brigadier General Blackburn presented the feasibility study group's concept to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 10 July 1970, they endorsed it with enthusiasm and decided to have the raid carried out under their own direct authority. This decision bypassed the two key commanders who were running the war in Vietnam: the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii, Adm. John S. McCain, and Gen. Creighton Abrams in Vietnam. Consequently, the Son Tay POW rescue became the first joint military operation in U.S. history conducted under direct control of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[4]

After Blackburn completed his briefing to the Joint Chiefs, Ropka tossed in the idea for a possible diversionary naval operation from the Gulf of Tonkin. Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., who had just succeeded the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, as the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), questioned the need for such a diversion. Because Zumwalt was so new at the helm of the Navy, Blackburn's staff did not know how to interpret his comments. They did not abandon their proposal and soon learned that Admiral Zumwalt would defer to his commander in the Gulf of Tonkin, V. Adm. Frederick A. Bardshar, on

Navy participation, with the caveat that the force generated for the diversion would have to fit within the available resources at Yankee Station. Since the feasibility study group planned to train all necessary personnel for the rescue in the United States and deploy them to Southeast Asia for the execution, they anticipated mission support from in-theater Air Force assets with the same caveat—that all providing assistance should not disrupt their normal conduct of the air war. Consequently, the air and ground training and planning for the raid counted on the Navy to become a diversionary participant.

The original feasibility study group had only one Navy officer. He was a Navy SEAL (Sea Air Land), Lt. Theodore A. Grabowsky from the Chief of Naval Operations office. He participated in proposing the initial rescue concept that identified the ground force needed to raid the prison compound. Once the study group determined that this task would be assigned to the Army Green Berets, his expertise as a Navy SEAL was no longer needed. However, when the feasibility study group became the prisoner rescue planning group, Capt. William M. Campbell and Lt. Cdr. Clair R. Hershey, both from the Chief of Naval Operations office, were added. Hershey provided planners with special weapons expertise, and Campbell became Admiral Zumwalt's liaison with the group. Campbell continued briefing Zumwalt weekly on the progress of raid planning and training in Florida. Naval diversion planning would not begin until the raiders were ready for deployment to Southeast Asia.

After approval by the Joint Chiefs, the feasibility study group expanded into a twenty-seven-member planning group that coordinated general details and set requirements for the raid in the form of operations and training plans under the code name Ivory Coast. These included the approximate number of ground personnel, types of aircraft and equipment, as well as training locations and raid launching and support bases. The training plan was completed on 20 August and the operations plan on 28 August 1970.[5]

Recruiting for the Joint Contingency Task Group

Brigadier General Blackburn was sadly disappointed when he learned from his boss, Lt. Gen. John Vogt, Director of Operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that he could not spare him from his normal duties to take personal charge of the rescue operation.[6] This leadership

role would go to another brigadier general who was in charge of the Air Force Special Operations Forces at Eglin AFB in Florida. This sprawling military facility in the Florida Panhandle would also serve as an ideal training site for the joint raiding force. The amount of air support for the contemplated rescue would require extensive coordination with various Air Force major air commands and units both at home and in Southeast Asia. This requirement favored Air Force leadership of the Joint Contingency Task Group (JCTG). Brig. Gen. LeRoy J. Manor became that leader. In spite of his initial disappointment, Blackburn remained focused. He picked the best man he knew to be Manor's deputy and to engineer the ground portion of the POW rescue mission. He was Army Special Forces Col. Arthur D. Simons, who had vast combat experience in World War II, Korea, and Southeast Asia. His troops, peers, and superiors referred to him in conversations not as "Colonel" but as "Bull" Simons. Blackburn's relationship with Simons went back to World War II, when they employed unconventional ways to combat the Japanese behind enemy lines. Simons had served under him in a Laotian operation code named White Star when Blackburn was chief of the clandestine Studies and Observation Group in Saigon. That operation trained Hmong Laotians to fight the North Vietnamese, who used Laos as a conduit for sending equipment and supplies to South Vietnam.

Bull Simons would make sure that the rescue operation would have the best possible commanders to train and lead the troops. He had a number of his former and trusted associates in mind who would eagerly volunteer for any operation under his command. He hoped that they would be available and could be released from their current assignments. He knew that almost all of his troops would have to come from the available Green Berets at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, where he went and posted notices throughout the Special Forces areas. These notices invited volunteers for a moderately hazardous mission and alerted them to a briefing at the Brigade Theater. Estimates of how many showed up vary between three hundred and five hundred. Bull Simons was very brief. He said that he needed volunteers for a hazardous mission that would take men away from home for some time without additional temporary duty pay. Anyone who was still interested should come back to the same theater that afternoon and bring with him his military personnel file. More than one hundred men showed up for the second briefing.[7]

To reduce this number to the needed eighty-two enlisted men and fifteen officers, Simons relied on a man whom he had just met. It was Army

Lt. Col. Joseph R. Cataldo, a medical doctor from the Office of the Surgeon General in the Pentagon. "Doc" Cataldo, as he preferred to be called, was an energetic "I can do it" type of guy who had a knack for getting along with people. Together with Bull Simons he orchestrated a misinformation-filled interview process that had successful candidates wondering about what they had just gotten themselves into. Their questions covered all global cultures and climates. They were quizzed about tolerances for people of different religions and customs, consumption of strange foods, and their ability to swim, ski, and operate under various stresses and natural disasters that could befall a man.[8] This was done to determine their competence to perform various desired tasks and to ensure that no one could successfully determine what kind of an operation was being planned or where it would take place.

As Bull Simons expected, he had a more difficult time in getting the two principal subordinates who would lead the ground assault on the POW camp. Both were U.S. Army Rangers assigned to the Ranger Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Lt. Col. Elliott P. "Bud" Sydnor, who would become the overall ground force commander, was chief of the school, and Capt. Richard J. "Dick" Meadows, who would lead the group to free the POWs, was an irreplaceable school staff member with unmatched combat experience. Simons had no problem getting Meadows on temporary duty orders for the Ivory Coast project, but the release of Sydnor was challenged. The commanding general at Fort Benning had reservations about giving up his chief of the Ranger Infantry School. Bull Simons had to make a personal visit to Fort Benning to convince the general that he had a higher priority mission for his indispensable man's service.[9]

The trio of Simons, Sydnor, and Meadows had to be the best grouping of leaders for this task. Bull Simons was already a legend in the Green Beret ranks, and the other two were well on their way to establishing their records as extraordinary soldiers. All enjoyed tremendous and well-earned respect from the men they led. They were demanding leaders who insisted on exhaustive special training and conditioning for every operation. They shared an enviable record of not losing a single man in combat. Their colleagues recognized their contributions to the U.S. military by inducting them into the Ranger Hall of Fame. The number of volunteers who showed up at Bull Simons's recruiting meeting at Fort Bragg would certainly have filled the auditorium to standing room only had it been publicized that Sydnor and Meadows were also a part of the advertised operation.

The key U.S. Army Son Tay raid leaders—Capt. Richard J. Meadows, Col. Arthur D. Simons, and Lt. Col. Elliott P. Sydnor Jr.—in October 1970 at Maj. Keith R. Grimes's wedding at Eglin AFB. (U.S. Army– Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Elliott Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

Bull Simons was one of the pioneers in the special operations field. His Army peers and contemporaries envied his successful military accomplishments, but he would never get to rise above the rank of colonel. He did not fit that day's professional career mold of a general, and the Special Operations Forces did not yet have the prestigious reputation they enjoy today. He earned his Army commission after completing the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the University of Missouri, from which he graduated in 1941 with a degree in journalism. He served with distinction in all the trouble spots of the world, beginning in World War II and later in Korea, Turkey, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. He began as a Ranger who qualified for the Special Forces when the Green Berets were established. He was at home there. Although he was unconventional, he was very prudent in his approach to every challenge in his path. He was not out to make a name for himself; he was there to do his duty. He did not attend all the professional advancement schools and did not cultivate any sponsors for his career. He just answered every call because it was the right thing for an American soldier to do. This

personal commitment to patriotic causes continued even after his retirement. In 1979 he engineered a successful rescue of Electronic Data Systems employees from a prison in Tehran, Iran. The Green Beret community and his admiring friend, Ross Perot, the chairman of the board of Electronic Data Systems Corporation, honored him by commissioning a thirteen-foot statue of him that now stands at the JFK Special Warfare Memorial Plaza at Fort Bragg. The JFK Special Warfare Museum building was renamed Simons Hall in his honor. Bull Simons will be remembered forever in the Special Forces community.

Bud Sydnor had served with Bull Simons in Laos when they trained members of the Hmong ethnic minority to oppose the North Vietnamese. He began his military career as an enlisted man in the Navy, where he served for four years as a submarine torpedo technician. He obtained a bachelor's degree from Western Kentucky University and a second lieutenant's commission through the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps in 1952. He served in Korea in the infantry and then switched to airborne at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg. He was chosen to serve as an exchange officer with the Special Air Service in the British army and qualified for Special Forces in 1962. He excelled in leading the troops and had a very distinguished service in Vietnam and Southeast Asia in the 1960s. In between his troop assignments, he managed to graduate from the Command and General Staff College in 1964, the Armed Forces Staff College in 1967, and the U.S. Army War College in 1970. He had always been a leader who enjoyed loyal respect from his men. He was dependable and cool-headed even under the toughest of combat conditions. As far as Bull Simons was concerned, Bud Sydnor was his first choice to lead the ground assault troops at Son Tay.

Dick Meadows had also served with Bull Simons in Laos and on various other assignments. He had a unique reputation among the troops. He had enlisted at the age of fifteen and at twenty became the youngest master sergeant among U.S. troops in the Korean War. He moved into Special Forces, where he became the first noncommissioned officer to participate in an exchange program with the British Special Air Service, earning this agency's coveted wings. In Southeast Asia he served with Bull Simons on Operation White Star in Laos and in the Studies and Observation Group in Vietnam, where he specialized in capturing North Vietnamese soldiers for interrogations. This specialty included conducting secret incursions into North Vietnam. His Vietnam service was so impressive that he became the first battlefield commission recipient of that

war. This promotion came after he provided photographic evidence and captured enemy equipment that unmasked previously concealed North Vietnamese troops and weapons infiltration into South Vietnam. Bull Simons had the honor of pinning captain's bars on Dick Meadows.

Brigadier General Manor's Air Force career was equally distinguished. He graduated from aviation cadet training in 1943 and flew 72 combat missions in Europe. After the war he flew as an instructor pilot at various bases for six years before going to Turkey to serve with the Allied Tactical Air Force. After graduating from the Armed Forces Staff College, he moved through several career-enhancing assignments to the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations at Headquarters USAF. He went to Vietnam in 1968 to assume command of the 37th Tactical Fighter wing and flew 275 combat missions. Early in 1970 he became the commander of the USAF Special Operations Forces. In 1978, shortly after he retired as a lieutenant general, he was recalled for duty as the senior negotiator for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and advisor to the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines. He was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1994.

Manor's selection process was not as easy as that of his deputy, Bull Simons. His airmen were spread out all over the world, and he had to rely on several principal subordinates to do much of the recruiting. As commander of the Air Force Special Operations Forces he controlled the Combat Talon C-130s at Pope AFB in North Carolina and the A-1E Skyraiders at nearby Hurlburt Field. The Jolly Green Giant HH-53s and HH-3s were based at his home, Eglin AFB, but they belonged to the Military Airlift Command. One C-130 Combat Talon crew was needed from Germany, and several helicopter and fighter pilots would have to be brought in from Vietnam and Thailand.

The Washington-based Ivory Coast planners left Manor with several aircraft capability issues that needed to be resolved before his staff could proceed with detailed air operations planning. Their initial concept called for employing rescue Super Jolly Green Giant HH-53 helicopters and A-1E Skyraider fighters the same way they were used in rescuing downed airmen from behind enemy lines. These had always been daytime operations on a smaller scale and never this deep into enemy territory. Jolly Greens and Skyraiders did not have the precision navigational capability for flying directly to a small group of buildings that concealed a POW camp. They needed some other slow-flying aircraft to lead them there and to mark their exact landing spot. MC-130E(I) Combat Talons, which

had been conducting successful clandestine nighttime operations over North Vietnam, became the primary candidates for this important role. But before committing them for the raid, Manor needed some assurances of their suitability for such a joint mission. Two of his staff members would soon provide them by making a special flight aboard one of these aircraft from Pope AFB, North Carolina.

Combat Talon Capabilities

The entire Combat Talon program consisted of twelve specially equipped aircraft. Four of them were based at Pope AFB in North Carolina, four at Nha Trang Air Base in Vietnam, and four at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. These C-130s used terrain-following radar that permitted them to fly as low as 250 feet above the ground and at other selected low altitudes to avoid detection by enemy radars. They were painted with early stealth technology's nonreflective paint, which reduced the amount of radar energy bounced back to interrogating radars. They were also equipped with up-to-date passive electronic countermeasure systems that detected enemy radars and their locations, enabling electronic warfare officers (EWOs) to determine when hostile fire was imminent and when it was time to get out of harm's way. EWOs could dispense chaff to divert radar's attention from their aircraft and had a limited capability to interfere with the airborne radars of pursuing enemy interceptors. Terrain-following radar and other types of electronic equipment were so highly classified that the MC-130E(I)s required special parking places with armed guards to limit aircraft access to crew members and authorized maintenance personnel.

Another little-known capability of the early Combat Talons was their Fulton Recovery System for ground-to-air extraction of personnel and cargo at 130-knot airspeed. A Talon would fly over an individual (or two) who needed to be picked up and drop a one- or two-person recovery kit. The kit contained a special one-size-fits-all recovery suit, with sewn-in parachute harness fittings, that was secured to a five-hundred-foot braided nylon cord lift line. The other end of the lift line was tied to an inflatable balloon. With the kit came a three-foot diameter sphere filled with compressed helium and easy-to-follow illustrated instructions on how to prepare a pick-up site. The person or persons who needed rescue would first don the recovery suit and then inflate the balloon with helium. Then they would release the balloon to the maximum extension of the lift

line and seat themselves on the ground looking downwind. They would face the incoming aircraft that would return for a pick-up twenty minutes after the kit drop. Talon aircraft had a special "V" yoke mounted on the nose of the aircraft. This yoke would be extended and would guide the intercepted lift line into a locking mechanism above the radome of the aircraft. Thanks to the magic of geometry and the stretch of the braided nylon lift line, suited persons would not be dragged but lifted straight up and then propelled forward in a giant arc that would rise above the aircraft flight level. From there the path of the in-trail passengers would stabilize just below the tail level, from where the loadmasters would winch them inside the aircraft through the tail ramp. Pick-up rides were memorable events for individuals who experienced them. Surprisingly, they were smooth, and the initial lift-off was gentler than the opening shock of a parachute. The Fulton Recovery System was featured in one of the James Bond movies and in the John Wayne film *The Green Berets*.

The Combat Talon unit at Nha Trang Air Base in Vietnam was the 15th Air Commando Squadron. Its Talon code name was Combat Spear. It was under the operational control of the clandestine Studies and Observation Group that was once commanded by Brigadier General Blackburn. Its daytime missions consisted of normal airlift support for the Special Forces throughout the war zone. Its nighttime missions were TOP SECRET clandestine flights into North Vietnam with specially trained teams that parachuted into various regions. These teams were then air resupplied on as-needed basis. Other nighttime missions involved psychological operations that delivered millions of leaflets from high altitudes to specially targeted North Vietnamese soldiers and populations.

The Combat Talon unit at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, the 7th Special Operations Squadron (SOS), code named Combat Knife, had the same wartime capability as the unit in Vietnam. During the cold war years it trained extensively with the U.S. military's Special Forces and the Special Operations units of NATO allies.

Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina

Combat Arrow was the code name for Detachment 2 of the 1st Special Operations Wing based at Pope AFB in North Carolina. Its routine combat crew training was interrupted in mid-August of 1970 when Lt. Col. Benjamin N. Kraljev called to say that he needed one aircraft to

pick him up at Andrews AFB in Washington, D.C., to conduct a quick radar-related equipment test. Kraljev was the Pentagon's Combat Talon program manager. There was nothing unusual about his request because the MC-130E(I)s were due to get a new terrain-following radar in a modification of the fleet that was being planned at that time. The detachment commander, Lt. Col. Peyton C. Cook, was on leave, so the unit's senior pilot, Lt. Col. Albert P. Blosch, known to all as "Friday" Blosch, took the call. "Friday" responded quickly. He assembled a crew and took off for Andrews AFB.

Lt. Col. Ken Chapman, Detachment 2's chief navigator, called me shortly after the aircraft departed. I was the chief of radar instruction and would probably have been called upon to go on this radar test. However, I was still in crew rest because I had had a late flight on the previous night. In any case, Chapman and others thought that I might have a clue about what was going on because I knew Ben Kraljev from my attendance at annual Lockheed Air Service (LAS) conferences in Ontario, California. At those meetings we discussed navigational shortcomings of the original Combat Talon fleet and shared experiences with representatives from other Talon units. In addition, I had some experience with the Texas Instruments engineers who built the APQ-115 terrain-following radar and adapted it for use in our C-130s. I had also worked with the LAS staff on publications and checklists pertaining to this radar. I had no clue as to why Ben Kraljev needed a test flight.

When the test flight returned, Chapman called me again with even more questions. I learned that the crew picked up not only Ben Kraljev but also Larry Ropka, whom I had met at our conferences in California. His office in the Pentagon had the primary responsibility for another highly classified C-130 program code named Heavy Chain. This aircraft used essentially the same navigation and electronic countermeasures equipment as our Talons minus the Fulton Recovery System.

Kraljev and Ropka had the crew fly at above terrain-following altitudes and at very slow airspeeds that were outside the normal operational limits of our radar's terrain-following and navigation capabilities. During the test flight they used the radar only in its limited mapping mode. Maj. Robert Frazier, the navigator who related this to me, was instructed to fly parallel to a river. Then at one point the two visitors identified a cluster of nearby farm buildings on the right-hand side of the river and asked him to note them as a target on his radar. Then they told Frazier to direct "Friday" Blosch to over-fly that target from the same direction after flying

here and there for several minutes. Frazier did a good job directing the aircraft to the same target, and the two Pentagon visitors were satisfied. They said nothing to the crew about what they were looking for and asked to be dropped off back at Andrews AFB. All this was very interesting to me, but I still had no idea about what they were up to.

On the following day Ben Kraljev called back and asked "Friday" Blosch to volunteer for a special project that would take about three months and entail some hazardous flying. When "Friday" accepted, Ben asked him to put together an all-volunteer crew of the best-qualified Vietnam veterans for this project. Because "Friday" had served in Vietnam with almost all the crews that were now in the 7th Special Operations Squadron in Germany, Ben asked him for a list of the names of men who could form another crew for the same project from that unit. This is how "Friday" recalls this event in his memoirs:

> Ben asked me if I would volunteer for a mission when the chances of returning were considered less than 50%. I asked in return, "Was the mission worth it?" He said, "General Ryan [the Air Force Chief of Staff] thinks so." Then I said, "Yes!" Then he said, "I am glad you said that because you have already been selected." He also added: "You have the job of getting the rest of two crews to volunteer and I can't tell you anything more about the mission. It will be some time before you know anything more about it."[10]

"Friday" Blosch invited me to volunteer because of my prior experience with the APQ-115 terrain-following radar. I did not hesitate for a moment when he called me to participate in the I-can't-tell-you-anything-about-this project. Every other crew member who was approached with this offer did likewise. So presumably did all twelve maintenance and five security police personnel from Pope AFB who were needed to support this temporary duty project.

Temporary duty orders, which assigned us to project Ivory Coast at Eglin AFB, were produced as soon as the list of all "volunteers" was compiled. No one knew what project Ivory Coast was all about, but all of us were sure that we would find out in Florida. We were very wrong. Many of us were kept in the dark throughout the training period and deployment to Southeast Asia. Some in maintenance and security police did not find out about the raid until after we returned to our post-mission recovery base in Thailand.

] CHAPTER TWO [

Raid Training and Planning

Preparation for the Son Tay raid was very challenging for both Army and Air Force participants. It demanded very rigorous training for the Special Forces and required highly unusual formation flying for the Air Force crews. Mission planning and training had to overlap because many plan details depended on the results of experimentation with unconventional tactics that had not been attempted by anyone before and on lessons learned during this process. Experienced airmen had to fly under conditions that would test the design and operational limits of their aircraft. There was utmost emphasis on secrecy and ground and air operations safety. Only the Joint Contingency Task Group planners knew the mission's purpose. The rest of the raiders were kept in the dark about the intent of the super-secret project for which they had so eagerly volunteered.

Eglin Air Force Base, Florida

Eglin AFB was an ideal training site for the Son Tay raid. Located on the Emerald Coast in Florida's northwestern Panhandle, its 724-square-mile area had numerous ranges for conducting military exercises and for testing all types of weapons. It had several auxiliary airfields, two of which were fully operational air bases. Auxiliary Field Number 3, north of Eglin Main, was better known as Duke Field, and Auxiliary Field Number 9, to the west, was called Hurlburt Field.

Eglin Main was the home of the Air Force Systems Command's Armament Development and Test Center, which was responsible for the development and testing of new weapons. It also housed the headquarters of Brigadier General Manor's Air Force Special Operations Forces Command and the Air Force Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center that trained Jolly Green Giant helicopter crews for service in Southeast Asia. Hurlburt Field was the home of the 1st Special Operations Wing,

which possessed a variety of propeller-driven aircraft. Air Force and foreign pilots trained there for assignments in the Vietnam War. This versatile Special Operations Wing was also the parent wing of the MC-130E(I) Combat Talon Detachment 2 that was based at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina.

Due to the weapons development, testing, flying training, and military exercises, Eglin was a very busy place where one could encounter transient personnel from all services. Everyone was there working on something special, and all those special assignments were shrouded in various degrees of secrecy. Consequently, everyone there was used to minding his own business and not questioning occasional unusual events or the presence of military visitors from other service branches. In such a vast military installation, Ivory Coast training did not become conspicuous to enemy agents who lurked around popular soldier hangouts or to the Soviet trawlers in the Gulf of Mexico that conducted surveillance of everything that generated an electromagnetic signal. We had our own counterintelligence people who monitored all our activities, ensuring that we kept the nature of our mission well concealed.

Army Special Forces

Col. Bull Simons did not waste any time in preparing the Special Forces training site. He formed a troop detachment and dispatched an advance party to Duke Field to make arrangements for billeting and training space for just over one hundred men. An excellent complex with six barracks, a dining hall, a small Base Exchange, and a rather ominous beer hall had just become available. It was used during the summer as a training camp for Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets. Bull's Green Berets would be well isolated there from the daily activities of Eglin AFB and would live in proximity to several training areas their mission required.

The support staff whom Bull Simons picked to run the training facility were just as superb as the men who would lead the troops in the raid. They were men who knew him and would readily follow him without asking probing questions. He already knew five men from Fort Bragg who served with Frisbie's planning group. All were respected members of the Special Forces community. He would keep them on for continuity of effort. Maj. James H. "Jim" Morris, who had served with Simons in Laos

and masterminded the ground assault plan with Sydnor and Meadows, became his detachment's plans officer. Because he was in on every aspect of planning and training, he also qualified as the alternate ground assault commander should something prevent Sydnor from leading the raid. Maj. Boyd F. "Sy" Morris became the supply officer. On the noncommissioned officer side of the Florida team were two sergeants major: Donald M. Davis for detachment planning and Minor B. Pylant for training. M. Sgt. William S. Gann and Sgt. 1C Jesse E. Sherrod provided administrative support (see appendix table 1, Army Special Forces Planners).

Bull Simons also recruited two Korean War POWs. The first was Lt. Col. James V. Bailey from the Pentagon, considered to be the Army Special Forces authority on communications. The second was Maj. Gerald Kilburn, who headed the support detachment and was responsible for training and billeting facilities. We, the Air Force planners, did not get to know them very well and believed that Bailey had been the first U.S. military POW in Southeast Asia. I learned after the publication of the first edition of this book that we had mistaken him for Maj. Lawrence R. Bailey Jr., who was captured after his Air America aircraft was shot down over Laos in March 1961. Major Bailey was released in August 1962. Our small group also referred to Jim as "Beetle Bailey," even though he was not called that by his colleagues.

One final very important recruit was Lt. Col. Bill L. Robinson, who served as the operations officer responsible for every phase of troop training. Sgt. Maj. Minor B. Pylant became his right-hand man. As vital as the duties of these two men were, Simons opted not to brief them on the name and location of the POW camp until it became absolutely necessary. Robinson did not learn the full details about the Son Tay mission until mid-October and Kilburn, just before he deployed with the troops to Thailand. Capt. Randle L. Smith, a crafty supply officer who became Sy Morris's assistant in procuring unconventional equipment for the raiders, did not deploy to Southeast Asia. He learned about the raid along with the other stay-behind troops by listening to the radio. Throughout the planning and training, only four of the fifty-six men who eventually landed at Son Tay knew the name and the location of the POW camp. They were Simons, Sydnor, Cataldo, and Meadows.

Simons made no bones about the tight-lipped environment he needed at Duke Field. When his troops began studying the elaborate tabletop

prison model, he cautioned them not to make any preconceived geographic location guesses based on its vegetation and structures. All of these were common to South America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. He made it clear to all that loose tongues would invite his personal wrath and issued a very clear threat that anyone suspected of compromising security would be thrown into solitary confinement at Fort Bragg until the operation was over—a career-ending punishment. After that, additional severe measures would follow for placing the lives of fellow soldiers in jeopardy. The threat worked.[1]

Training

Hard work for the troops began on Wednesday, 9 September. Physical fitness was the first hurdle the volunteers had to pass. Running began at 4:00 A.M. It started on the first day with eight repetitions of Army Drill #1 and a one-mile run with full patrol harness. By the seventh day, men would perform twelve drill repetitions and run two miles. Eventually the running distance increased to three miles.[2] This distance was maintained as a minimum for the duration of the training, with more combat equipment added to each runner's burden. Some failed to measure up to the established training tempo and were assigned to the growing number of support troops that were needed to prepare the training sites and perform the ever increasing number of chores. They had to ensure that the ones who remained in competition had everything ready for each challenging day. The Duke Field training site became more and more like a professional football training camp. Competition was intense. No one wanted to be cut from the team, whose final number was expected to consist of about sixty men. Selected company-grade officers had to excel in everything, just as did the men whom they would eventually pick to be on their smaller teams.

On top of strenuous physical fitness, raiders had to demonstrate highly competitive expertise in at least three of the five Special Forces skills: weapons, demolitions, communications, intelligence, and medicine. Lt. Col. Bill Robinson and Sgt Maj. Minor Pylant compiled detailed records on each man and his areas of expertise. These training records, along with their enthusiasm and day-to-day improvements, would determine each man's eventual placement on various raider teams. Eventually the field was narrowed to fifty-one primary members and ten backups.

They were the best people in the U.S. Army to conduct this daring raid. Most of them were seasoned veterans with many prior enemy encounters, but there were also four of them who had not seen prior combat in Vietnam. They won their assignments as raiders because of their unique capabilities, enthusiasm, and demonstrated successes in individual competition. They were Sgts. Terry L. Buckler, Keith R. Medenski, Marshall A. Thomas, and Patrick St. Clair.

Twenty-year-old Terry Buckler was the youngest of the raiders. He came to Florida as a demolition man who met all of the physical fitness requirements but ended up on rotation as one of the six security guards for the Tactical Operations Center building where the initiated staff conducted top-secret planning for the raid. He was frustrated because he was not one of the chosen ones who began training for a role in the raid. One day while he was on guard duty he griped about it directly to Bull Simons when he paused to speak to the security guards. Whatever Terry said to "the Bull" must have had the right stuff because not long after that he began training at the prison mockup. Eventually he won an assignment as the radioman for the commander of the Redwine Group. Today Terry holds a unique distinction in the Special Forces community as the Green Beret who had never served in South Vietnam but spent about thirty minutes on the ground in North Vietnam. His selection for the raid placed him in the company of the oldest and the most experienced machine gunner and raider: M. Sgt. Galen C. Kittleson.

Kittleson admitted to being forty-six years old, and everyone called him "Pappy." During World War II, as a nineteen-year-old Alamo Scout, young Galen participated in two successful raids to free prisoners from Japanese POW camps in the Philippines. The first one freed dozens of Dutch and local families from an internment camp and the second, a raid on Cabanatuan POW camp, freed more than five hundred survivors of the Bataan Death March. Then in Vietnam, when he was already known as "Pappy," he participated in an unsuccessful rescue search for Capt. Nick Rowe, who was held captive by Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Even though no one knew what or where the Ivory Coast target area was, "Pappy" Kittleson sensed all along that this would be his fourth opportunity to free imprisoned captives.

Patrick St. Clair was twenty-two years old. He had volunteered for a Vietnam tour on four occasions, but his requests were always denied because of shortages in his specialty as a medic. His second specialty was in infantry light weapons. This skill was instrumental in his selection

for project Ivory Coast by Bull Simons. His attitude and performance as an accomplished ambidextrous sharpshooter at Duke Field made him a prime candidate for the rescue mission. However, his position on a team was not ensured until a replacement became necessary on Captain McKinney's Blueboy Element. Pat would continue serving his country for many years after the raid and would surpass "Pappy" Kittleson in his active duty age. He would see action in both the Horn of Africa and Iraq during his mid-fifties as a command sergeant major in the West Virginia National Guard.

In between the youngest and the oldest were many with distinguished credentials and interesting personal and combat experiences. Sgt. 1C Vladimir Jakovenko, known to all as "Jake," was born in Ukraine. His family made an intriguing trek from the Soviet Union to West Germany and then to America. He retired as a sergeant major after twenty-nine years of distinguished service. I had the pleasure of witnessing his induction into the Ranger Hall of Fame at Fort Benning in 2003.

One raider had a close relative who was a POW somewhere in North Vietnam. 1Lt. George Petrie's cousin, Navy Lt. Cdr. James Martin Hickerson, bomber pilot from the USS *Ranger,* was shot down in November 1967. The two had grown up together in North Carolina with their grandmother. George idolized his cousin, who was five years older. He hoped all along that his Florida training was a prelude to a POW rescue in Vietnam and that he would have an opportunity to free his cousin Jim.

There was an unprecedented emphasis on marksmanship throughout their training. Even though each man would go on the raid armed to the teeth with several weapons that would give him great advantage over any encountered enemy, he would not be expected to use this superior firepower to annihilate his assigned target area. Controlled automatic and semiautomatic firing would be allowed only by designated individuals from arriving helicopters to destroy the guard towers and suspected guard quarters. Once on the ground, raiders were expected to bring down their opponents with single well-aimed shots. This was a must, especially inside the POW compound where extreme care was needed to avoid harming the captives. Outside the compound automatic fire could be used only if it was necessary to pin down the enemy. Enemy in plain sight warranted only a single well-placed shot.

All who were chosen excelled in this skill, but they all had one big problem. When they transitioned from daytime to nighttime firing their

accuracy did not meet the expectations of Bull Simons and his staff. Something had to be done to fix this shortcoming. The U.S. military never developed an appropriate rifle sight for use at night, but some such devices were available commercially to civilian gun enthusiasts. Some raiders were aware of magazines that advertised various night vision devices and gun sights. Meadows recalled seeing at a gun show a night sight that was made by Armalite Corporation in California. They scanned several gun catalogs and located the manufacturer of the "Single Point Nite Sight." They ordered one and tested it with great success. It was a 6 ¾-inch device that weighed only seven ounces and sold for under fifty dollars. It satisfied Bull Simons, and the supply guys bought enough of them to outfit every raider. Support personnel used many rolls of black electrical tape to affix the sights securely to each man's primary weapon.[3]

The single point night sight required men to shoot with both eyes open. This demanded new marksmanship discipline that they attained with about two hours of training. The end results were amazing. Even the poorest shooter could place all rounds in a twelve-inch circle at night from twenty-five meters. At a distance of fifty meters, the same shooter could place every round inside of a man-size silhouette. With both eyes open, men could shift their fire from one target to another just as rapidly as in daytime and with the same accuracy.[4]

Bull Simons was also concerned about the nighttime accuracy of the Air Force gunners who would attack guard towers and guard billets from the air. They were Jolly Green Giant pararescuemen trained to deliver a tremendous amount of firepower with their Gatling guns during personnel rescues. They could saturate large areas with bullets and keep enemy troops from exposing themselves. Could they focus their fire accurately on a very small area and avoid having stray bullets go into places where a friendly captive may be held? There were rooms or small holding facilities beneath each tower that could contain prisoners. As with every other idea of the planners, this concept needed testing. Separate mock towers had to be constructed with silhouetted targets representing guards on top and a six-by-six-foot target cloth simulating a holding room below. The HH-53 gunship crew flew several test runs at about fifty feet and 12 to 18 knots, shooting at the target with impressive results. Air Force gunners fired several thousand rounds and completely obliterated the top guard portion of the towers. Bull Simons could not find a single hole in the six-by-six target cloth.[5]

Daytime firing from Jolly Green machine guns was impressive, but the darkness of night presented a new problem. Firing at a rate of either

two thousand or four thousand rounds per minute produced a plume of fire that disrupted the night vision of the gunners. Demonstrated daytime accuracy of pararescuemen became questionable at night. The collocation with the Air Force's Armament and Development Test Center at Eglin paid off. The gunship crew found a quick solution by adapting flash suppressors from A-37 aircraft guns. Once the flash suppressors were properly mounted, the gunners never lost night vision and thus maintained their normal accuracy.

Accurate firing from a helicopter during the landing approach to the POW camp was a challenge for the Green Berets who would end up inside the courtyard. They would have to fire at the same towers that had already been attacked by the HH-53 gunship. This was to ensure that the guards in the tower did not survive the helicopter landing. Also, they had to be ready to destroy the towers in case the gunship failed to arrive at the camp. Experimental tower attacks were made in both the Army UH-1H and the Air Force HH-3 helicopters. Many changes were made in the men's firing positions to ensure that the maximum number of rounds could be delivered to the high-threat areas of the compound during the landing. The Huey allowed four CAR-15 shooters from the right and only two from the left. CAR-15 (Colt Assault Rifle–15) was the folding stock submachine gun version of the M-16 that was favored by the Green Berets. The HH-3 allowed one 7.62-caliber machine gun mounted in the left window and ten CAR-15s from the right doors, windows, and the rear ramp. The HH-3 could deliver more rounds of fire and afford almost 360-degree coverage during the landing. All ammunition used during the landing attack would consist of solid tracers. This was done for the benefit of the machine gunner, who would be able to see the impacts of all his rounds and for the added psychological impact on the enemy, who would have to face the incoming hail of bullets from all weapons.[6]

Supply Challenges

The single point night sight was not the only unique item raiders had to procure outside of normal military supply channels. Their special mission required many nonstandard military items that were either not available or that had to be modified to suit their specific needs. The most futuristic item was the night vision device that was under development in a night vision laboratory at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Only four of them were avail-

able, and the lab allowed us to test them. These were the early predecessors of night vision devices widely used by the armed forces today. They were more sensitive to sources of light, which caused some problems and limited their effectiveness, but they were much better than the old Starlight scopes that soldiers were familiar with in the early 1970s. All four were used on the raid. This was their baptismal employment in combat.

Among the unusual supply items were oxygen-acetylene torches, gasoline-powered chain saws, and loudspeaker megaphones. They came from local commercial sources. The torches were needed to cut a variety of leg stocks, locks, and metal hasps that held the POWs to floors, beds, and walls. Sixteen-inch chain saws were needed to cut down wooden utility poles in the vicinity of helicopter landing zones. Loudspeaker megaphones would be used to announce the raid to the POWs and to give them instructions prior to their departure to freedom.

Among the nonstandard Special Forces supply items were thirty round magazines for M-16 rifles. They had to be procured directly from the Colt Arms Company. Standard military issue magazine pouches were for twenty rounds, and the Army did not have larger pouches for carrying thirty rounds. Eglin's fabric shop had to modify available claymore mine bags to carry them. Next the Army standard 12-gauge pump shotgun did not suit the building-clearing requirements. A substitute five-shot automatic 12-gauge duck-bill shotgun from a sporting goods catalog proved to be more efficient and deadlier. Thirty-six-inch Air Force firefighter bolt cutters were chosen for their size, strength, and ability to cut metal restraints. Air Force firefighter single-cut fire axes were adapted for breaking cell doors and locks. All raiders wore tight-fitting pilots' gloves that protected their hands and allowed them to retain the necessary feel for things. Earplugs and firing range ear protectors were provided because of the noise during the long helicopter ride and for use by the demolition personnel. Somewhat cumbersome but very useful miners' headlamps were obtained to illuminate dark spaces where the enemy could hide. Some opted to wear them affixed to their shoulder harnesses instead of on their foreheads. Raiders also needed goggles to protect them from dust and debris stirred up by the helicopters and from the bright flare light. Supply guys located suitable ones at the Army's Combat Development Command and modified them with special translucent tape that provided satisfactory bright light protection.

Many adapted items had to be modified before the raiders could use them. Standard machetes had to be ground down and reshaped at Eglin's

The Redwine Command Element. Standing, left to right: Capt. Daniel D. Turner, commander; Sgt. 1C Charles A. Masten, pathfinder; Sgt. 1C Ronnie Strahan, pathfinder; Sgt. Terry L. Buckler, radio telephone operator; and Lt. Col. Joseph R. Cataldo, JCTG doctor. Kneeling is Capt. James W. McClam, marshaling area control officer. Note the chain saw on the ground and the ax carried by Cataldo. This Redwine Element needed them to cut down telephone poles. (USAF photo, courtesy of Joseph Cataldo, renovated by John Gargus)

machine shop to make them usable for prying open hasps as well as for chopping through wooden obstacles. The fabric shop made a series of modifications to rucksacks so that various items could be attached to them. Each man would carry one survival radio and a radio for communicating with his unit. Space was needed for them as well as for machetes and bolt cutters. Standard vests the raiders opted to use did not fit the 40-mm grenades. They also had to be altered in the fabric shop. Finally, every raider needed a custom-made sling for his primary weapon, which hung in front of him ready for immediate use. With the sling looped over a man's neck, his weapon could be put into firing position instantly, enabling him to free both hands at any time he needed to handle something else. They also needed one fourteen-foot fireman's roof-scaling ladder that could be

Blueboy Element #2. Capt Thomas W. Jaeger, Sgt.1C William L. Tapley, and SSgts. Charles G. Erickson and Kenneth E. McMullin boarding their helicopter at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. (USAF photo, retouched by the author)

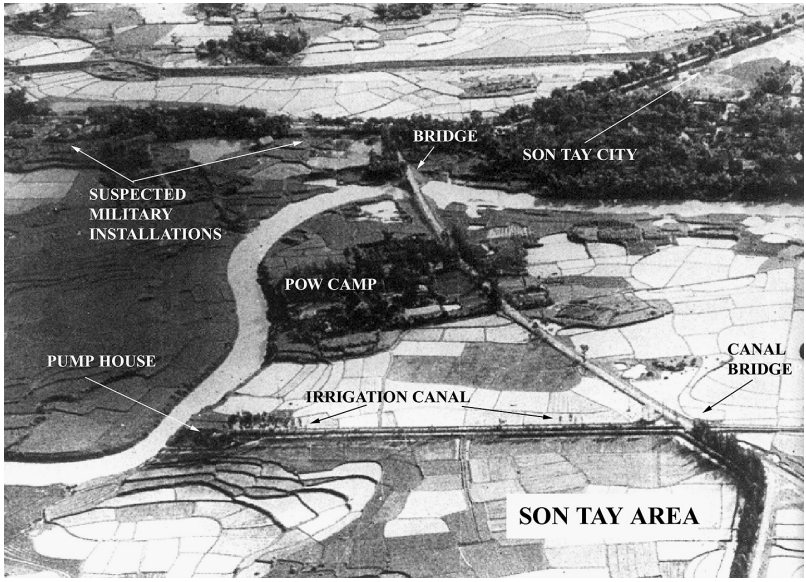
used in one alternate plan that required one group to scale the compound wall from the outside.

Fully armed raiders were adorned with very unusual gear and presented an awesome sight. They looked like androids from a science fiction world. Each one carried close to one hundred pounds of weapons and equipment. It was a heavy burden, but everyone knew that the raid would be short-lived and that he would not have to travel very far to his objective. If for some reason they got stranded on the ground, each man would be well equipped to provide a formidable opposition to the enemy and buy precious time for a sure-to-come intensive friendly rescue effort.

Ground Assault Planning

The geographical location of the Son Tay camp made it an ideal target for the raid. Even though it was just outside a major city and in countryside that was replete with military installations, the camp was isolated enough to invite a daring rescue attempt. It was located between the Song Con River and a paved road that led into the town of Son Tay. It was just far enough west of the road to be easily disguised as a small farming settlement surrounded by rice paddies. A curve in the river blocked access from the west and north. A canal that went from the river and across the road provided isolation from the south. Enemy reinforcements would have to use the road on the east side of the camp. The site just begged for invasion. If the raiders could get there without detection, they could clear the place in about twenty minutes and be out with rescued prisoners before any of the surrounding military installations could mount an organized opposition.

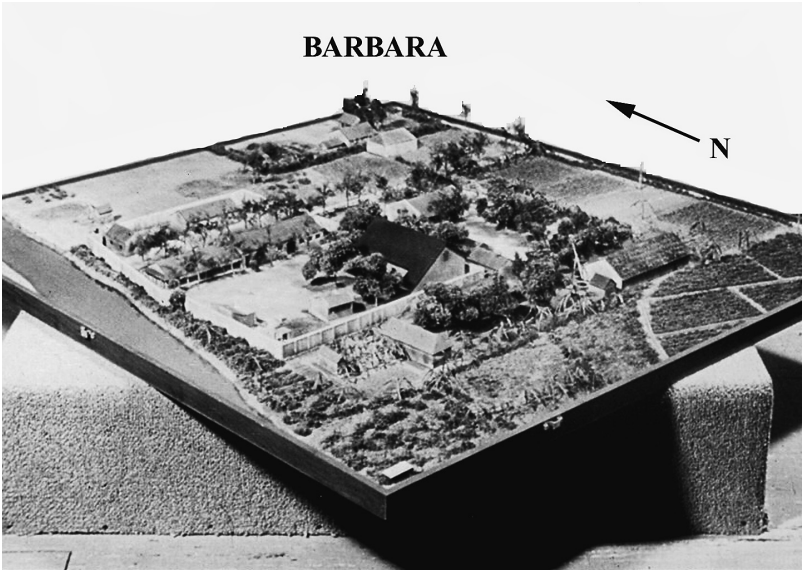
Special Forces planners were blessed by a unique tabletop model of the



Low-level photograph of the Son Tay prison complex taken by a reconnaissance drone. The Cherry One flight path was at about this altitude and crossed from the lower left to the upper right-hand corner of the picture. (USAF photo, courtesy of Lou Drendel of Aviation Art, Inc., annotated by John Gargus)

Son Tay prison that was produced by the best talents of the Central Intelligence Agency. This elaborate model of the prison was code named Barbara. It was an early masterpiece of Kenny Lane. During his thirty-six-year career at the agency he constructed fine-scale 3D models of everything imaginable, from terrain features, foreign military and governmental buildings, an entire Kremlin, streets of Iraqi-occupied Kuwait City, and Manuel Noriega's home and office in Panama to an oversized replica of Mao Zedong's ear, which was used to verify the authenticity of published photographs of the Chinese leader.[7] Studying "Barbara" required a special optical viewing device that could be placed anywhere inside this tabletop model. When one looked through its precisely scaled eyepiece the scene would be magnified to life size, and the viewer would find himself standing at any selected spot inside the prison compound. "Barbara" was named after Barbara L. Strosnider, a secretary from the USAF Directorate of Plans. She participated in the feasibility and operations planning efforts and often worked up to eighteen hours a day to get the plans done.

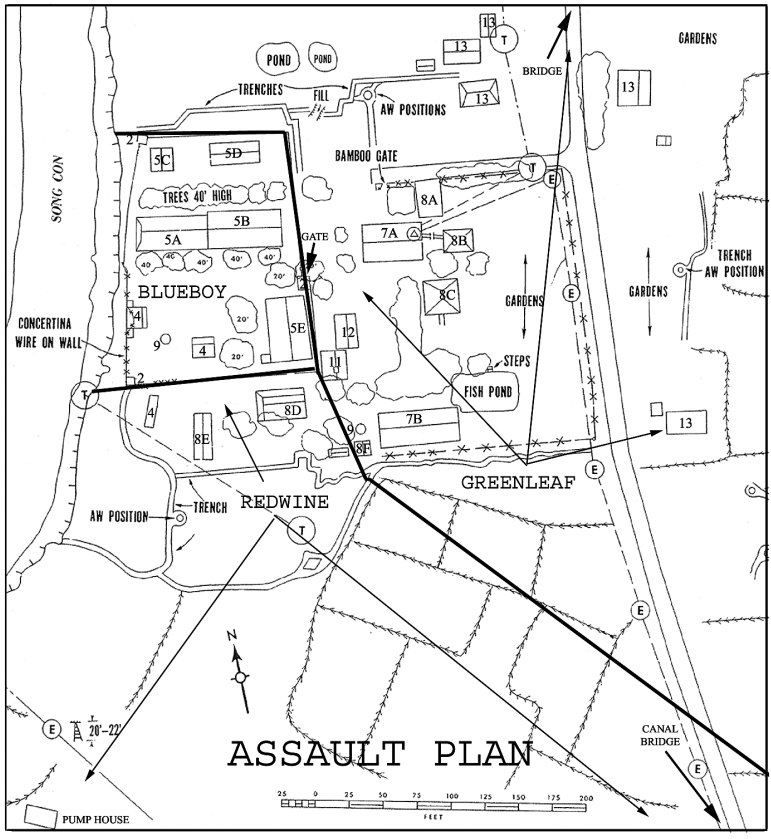
The original ground plan presented to Sydnor when he joined the planners in the Pentagon impressed him with its simplicity. His first comment



The tabletop model of the Son Tay camp code named "Barbara" was constructed by CIA artists from various photographs and available intelligence information. It measured approximately five by four feet. (USAF photo)

The author, Maj. John Gargus, with "Barbara," the tabletop model of the Son Tay prison compound, in front of the Air Force Special Operations headquarters in December 1970. (USAF photo renovated by John Gargus)

on its merit was that even he could understand it. He also liked the latitude it offered for innovation and application of unconventional tactics.[8] The plan proposed forming three groups to execute the rescue. The first group, code named Blueboy, would land in a helicopter inside the POW compound, eliminate the guards, and free the captives from their cells.



This figure shows the camp area and targets assigned to the Blueboy, Redwine, and Greenleaf Groups. (Joint Contingency Task Group sketch adjusted by John Gargus)

This approach seemed imperative because it was the only way to ensure that guards, alerted by an attack on their camp, would not have time to execute any of the prisoners. The second group, Redwine, would provide a strong defensive point at the road canal junction and secure the area south of the camp from which the helicopters would exfiltrate the raiders and rescued prisoners. The third group, Greenleaf, would provide security for the other two groups. They would clear the area east of the POW compound and blow up the Song Con River bridge. This would deny access to the raiders for the enemy reinforcements from the north and east.

Meticulously detailed plans evolved from this simple three-group con-

cept. Eventually, there would be a plan for each element of every group followed by specific tasking for each individual raider. Each man would have to know the roles and routes of other members of his team and be aware of what other elements on the left and right were expected to do in the same time frame during which he was carrying out his assigned duties. In addition each man needed to know how to respond to any alternate plans that could be forced upon the raiders by unexpected developments. As the training and competition for selection progressed, group commanders would pick the best-qualified men to lead the smaller elements of their units. Chosen element leaders would then participate in the selection of their smaller teams of men. (Appendix tables 8, 9, and 10 show the composition of each raider group.)

There was a significant difference in training between Blueboy and the other two groups. Blueboy's mission was to rescue prisoners who were locked in their cells within the compound walls. Redwine and Greenleaf had to clear and secure the areas outside the camp and ensure the safe evacuation of rescued prisoners. Consequently, the men of Blueboy had to focus on eliminating the guards before they could cause harm to any of their captives. This required precision marksmanship that would dispatch the guards with single shots. If the first shot did not do it, the second or the next, fired in a burst, would most likely be less accurate and impact in an unintended place. Consequently, Blueboy Group had to avoid automatic fire in proximity to prisoners.

For the same reason, they could not use grenades inside the buildings that housed the prisoners. Blueboy rescuers would use bolt cutters, specially modified machetes, firefighting axes, and acetylene torches to break down the doors of holding cells. Redwine and Greenleaf troops would have to take a different approach outside the compound. Everyone they encountered would be a foe that had to be eliminated. Single-shot accuracy was preferred, but automatic fire could be appropriate against hiding or fleeing enemy. Each man carried concussion and fragmentation grenades that could be tossed in through the doors and windows before entering the buildings. A number of men would carry specially modified 12-gauge shotguns for use at short ranges in building-clearing sweeps.

There was another perceived difference between these groups. Membership in the Blueboy Group was preferred, not only because the highly respected Dick Meadows would lead it but also because these men knew that they were training for a rescue of prisoners or hostages from somewhere. This was so even though the focal point of their mission was shrouded in

secrecy and kept away from them. Blueboy men would be the ones to break down the prison doors. All the rest would be there to ensure the safety of the operation. Consequently, many preferred to be on Dick Meadows's team and were willing to meet his demanding team requirements.

BLUEBOY GROUP

Initially, Blueboy Group had only eleven men. This number was limited by how many combat-equipped raiders could fit into a Huey when that helicopter was contemplated for inserting them into the prison courtyard. The group was expanded to Meadows's desired number of fourteen when the decision came to use the Air Force's HH-3 instead of the Army's Huey.

The Blueboy Command Element consisted of three men led by Dick Meadows. He would broadcast the rescue message to the POWs with a bullhorn upon landing and then oversee the rescue operation inside the compound. He would secure the southwest corner of the compound with his radio operator and a demolition man. An exit hole in the wall in the southwest corner of the compound was planned to provide the rescued prisoners with safe passage to the helicopter landing zone in the rice paddies. His element would also activate a demolition charge to destroy the helicopter once everyone was out of the compound.

The exit hole received special emphasis from the planning staff. The compound had a gate and a guard tower on the east wall and a secured door-size entrance near the east corner of the south wall. Normally these two could be considered convenient exit points for the rescued prisoners. However, both of them would have the prisoners passing through the guard barracks area where we anticipated the heaviest opposition from the enemy. It was much wiser to blow an exit hole in the southwest wall near the river. This was the area farthest from all anticipated firefights. The river would provide adequate protection from the western quadrant. Redwine and Greenleaf elements could provide adequate security from the north, east, and south. The helicopters would not remain in the Son Tay area during the ground operation. They would fly to a nearby safe landing site in rice paddies as soon as they offloaded the raiders. We could not risk having them shot up and disabled by the enemy during the ground assault. Helicopter pilots would not even shut down their engines while in their holding area. That would eliminate possible engine-starting problems. They had to be ready for immediate return to pick up the prisoners and their rescuers.

Capt. Dan H. McKinney, Blueboy One, would lead the first assault element of four men. Their mission would be to secure the north side of the compound, which included one guard tower and three buildings with POW cellblocks. Planners assigned numbers and letters to every building throughout the Son Tay camp. McKinney's element would take on buildings 5A, 5C, and 5D. Besides clearing these buildings and freeing their captives, McKinney would have a very important task. All Blueboy elements were supposed to bring rescued prisoners directly to him either one by one or in small groups. He would have a long lanyard with loops at three-foot intervals that would slip over and secure each freed prisoner's wrist. This was designed to ensure an orderly prisoner lineup and count. No one knew how the newly freed men would behave. They could be confused with disbelief, jump with joy, hug their rescuers, and certainly interfere with the jobs the raiders had to accomplish. Meadows would broadcast appropriate instructions with his bullhorn. All prisoners had to be located and led out in a single file to the helicopters through the hole in the wall. Dan McKinney would also ensure that in securing the prisoners to his lanyard he did not tie two disabled individuals next to each other. He would place an ablebodied one in front and another one behind such an individual so that they could assist each other all the way to the waiting helicopter.[9] Each Blueboy element had a medically qualified man who could provide assistance to anyone who was incapacitated. Stretchers would be available on their helicopter to carry out those who could not be taken out any other way.

Capt. Thomas W. Jaeger would lead the second four-man Blueboy Assault Element. His call sign was Blueboy Two. His element's task was to clear the southeast quadrant of the compound, which contained the largest camp building (number 5E), and to provide crossfire in securing the east gate.

1Lt. George W. Petrie's third assault element had only three men. As Blueboy Three he was tasked to clear the east gate guard tower and cover the access to the POW compound. His two men were to free the prisoners from building 5B.

The three-man helicopter crew would not have assault duties. They would be armed for self-defense and would be expected to move to safety near the south wall. Dick Meadows with his bullhorn could call upon them for assistance in escorting the freed POWs (see appendix table 8, Blueboy Assault Group).

REDWINE GROUP

Redwine Security Group would arrive in a helicopter with call sign Apple Two and land just across the air raid shelter trench due south of building 8D. It would include Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor's command party, which would not have an assigned combat sector. The command post location was to be on the east side of building 8E. Redwine Group's commander was Capt. Dan Turner. He had four security elements led by seasoned noncommissioned officers. They would secure a large area between the river and the road that stretched south of the compound wall and down to the irrigation canal. Turner would be accompanied by his radioman and operate to the east of Sydnor's location.

M. Sgt. Herman Spencer was the leader of Redwine's Security Element #1. It had five men, including a cameraman and a torchman. They would clear the terrain between the south wall and the trench from building 8D westward to the Song Con River.

M. Sgt. Joseph W. Lupyak would have a three-man Security Element #2. They were to clear the pump house by the river and provide protection

Capt. Dan Turner's Redwine Group at Duke Field, Florida. (Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Colonel Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

M. Sgt. Herman Spencer's Redwine Security Element #1. (Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Colonel Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

for the raider force against enemy forces that might try to approach the camp from the facilities located south of the irrigation canal.

Sgt 1C Donald D. Blackard's Security Element #3 had three men. Their task was to establish a defensive position on the small bridge over the canal and deny enemy access to Son Tay using the road that ran north to the bridge.

In addition, the Redwine Group had a two-man pathfinder element: Redwine 4. They had to prepare landing zones for the helicopters that would return to pick up the raiders and the POWs. Their task entailed toppling utility poles and clearing any obstacles that would pose hazards to air operations (see appendix table 9, Redwine Security Group).

GREENLEAF GROUP

Greenleaf Support Group's commander was Capt. Udo H. Walther. His delivery helicopter would be Apple One, which would also bring in the raid's alternate ground commander, Col. Bull Simons, and his two radio

M. Sgt. Joseph Lupyak's Redwine Security Element #2. (Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Colonel Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

operators. Walther's support group had three elements. They had to clear all the buildings east of the compound wall and north of the air raid shelter trench all the way to the bridge. They would also blow up the bridge. Captain Walther would lead the support element. This seven-man team was to proceed due north and assault guard billets (building 7B), the mess hall and kitchen (buildings 11 and 12), and four other buildings used by the camp administration.

Capt. Glenn Rouse's seven-man demolition element would advance along the east compound wall, make contact with Blueboy's George Petrie at the gate, and move expeditiously through the field to the bridge over the Song Con River. Two specially rigged forty-pound charges would destroy the bridge and stop any enemy assistance coming to the Son Tay guard force.

We had many good photographs of the bridge and an excellent small-scale model from the same people who constructed the camp model Barbara. Training staff used both models to build full-scale training mockups that were available for assault and demolition training at the C-2

Sgt. 1C Donald Blackard's Redwine Security Element #3. (Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Colonel Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

Capt. Udo Walther's Greenleaf Group at Duke Field, Florida. (Joint Contingency Task Group photo, courtesy of Colonel Sydnor, renovated by John Gargus)

range. There was a communication cable going under the west side of the bridge. A separate, much smaller explosive charge would be prepared to ensure the cable's destruction with an oversized bang that would take out the bridge.

Capt. Eric J. Nelson's five-man security element would dispatch two of its members up the road to the bridge to ensure that no enemy forces crossed it before Captain Rouse's demolition element could get there. The other three would clear the buildings east of the road, which we suspected to be officers' quarters (see appendix table 10, Greenleaf Support Group).

ALTERNATE PLANS

Nothing was left to chance. Simons, Sydnor, Meadows, and Morris addressed every possible contingency. They devised three alternate plans, which assumed that one of the helicopters did not make it to the objective area and that the rescue would have to be carried out by the two remaining groups.

Plan Blue assumed that something happened to the Blueboy elements on board Banana. The other two groups, Redwine and Greenleaf, would have to adjust and execute the rescue without them. Redwine Group would have to enter the prison compound over and through the walls and free the prisoners while the Greenleaf troops executed tasks assigned to them and their Redwine colleagues.

Plan Green covered a contingency in which Apple One with the Greenleaf Group did not make it all the way in. In this case, the Redwine Group would have to clear the surrounding buildings, provide its own perimeter defense, and blow up the bridge.

Plan Red assumed that the Redwine Group, with the raid's commander Bud Sydnor, failed to reach the objective area. Then the Greenleaf troops would have to split and clear the guardhouses and buildings outside of the walls in addition to providing their own outer perimeter defense.

These contingency plans placed a very heavy burden on the Redwine Group because they had to practice contingency plans that had them replace Blueboy on the inside of the camp and also be ready to assume the support and demolition role assigned to the Greenleaf Group. Blueboy did not figure in any alternate plans. They had no responsibility outside of their primary task of freeing the captives from the inside of the compound. If someone else did not make it all the way to Son Tay, their role

of freeing the captives would not be altered. Greenleaf men would have to cover the tasks assigned to Redwine if they did not make it or if Redwine had to storm the compound and assume the tasks assigned to the missing Blueboy Group. In each case, Greenleaf's alternate tasks would be the same.

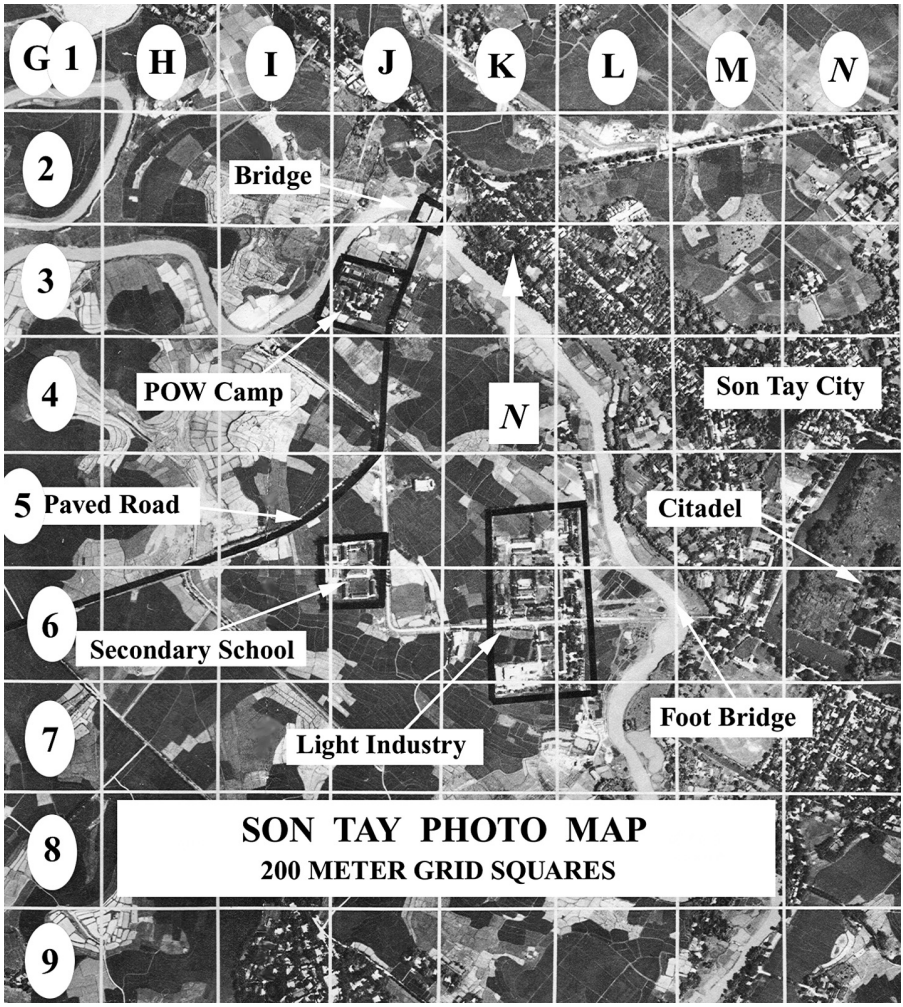
The communications plan for the raid called for an unprecedented number of radios. Fifty-six raiders would be on the ground with ninety-two radios.[10] The ground commander and his alternate would be busy just monitoring and responding to various transmissions. They needed a radio net to communicate with Brigadier General Manor at the Monkey Mountain Command Post in South Vietnam. Then they had to communicate with each group and element they commanded on the ground. They also needed a radio net and one alternate to communicate with Air Force fighters and helicopters and, if needed, with the orbiting Combat Talon C-130. Group commanders required a communication link with their elements. Greenleaf and Redwine had forward air guides who needed primary and alternate radios to direct the fighter aircraft. Finally, each raider carried with him a compulsory survival radio. Raid communication was a web of frequency modulated (FM) and ultra high frequency (UHF) radio links designed by Lieutenant Colonel Bailey.

Fighter Aircraft Support

The planned ground assault did not require close air support in the POW camp area. Ideally the fighters would be there to observe what was happening along the roads and around known military installations. The need for their active involvement would escalate if things did not go exactly as planned. If a group failed to reach its objective and alternate plans kicked in, then there would not be enough troops on the ground and the fighters would have to assist in denying the enemy road and bridge access to the area. Under the worst situation, if the raiders got trapped and outnumbered by the enemy, they would have to protect them with all available ordnance, even at the risk of running out of fuel. No one liked and planned for that scenario. It could happen only if the mission got compromised and the raiders were led into a well-planned ambush that could not be detected on approach. Such a foul-up would have kicked in an unprecedented rescue effort involving U.S. forces from the entire Southeast Asia area.

Maj. Keith R. Grimes, Air Force liaison officer, exchanging a few words with Capt. Glenn R. Rouse of the Greenleaf Group during a pause in training inside the POW camp mockup on Eglin AFB's C- 2 range. (USAF photo renovated by Carl Crantz)

Each Greenleaf and Redwine element had one member trained as a forward air guide who could direct A-1E fighter pilots to attack any target on the ground. Maj. Keith Grimes, Air Force liaison officer to the Special Forces, spent many hours at other Eglin ranges to make these men as competent as the Air Force forward air guides. Because they trained with only five fighter pilot crews, they learned each other's habits and could distinguish each other by their voices. Two A-1Es had to be over Son Tay throughout the ground engagement. They would not strike unless specifically directed by one of the forward air guides, who would coordinate with them over the radio and mark each target for attack with a white phosphorus grenade marker or with tracer bullets. This positive target identification was needed to prevent friendly fire incidents in a confined space where the Special Forces were so close to the enemy. The A-1Es would monitor the area around Son Tay and would be the first ones to see vehicular traffic approaching. Away from the camp they could interdict



A section of the grid map used by the A-1Es and the forward air guides on the ground to identify targets that needed to be attacked. (USAF photo overprinted by the Joint Contingency Task Group and John Gargus)

the enemy without the assistance of forward air guides and warn the elements on the ground about enemy approaching their positions. Grimes and the pilots devised a special photomap for use during the raid. They overprinted a remarkably detailed high-altitude photograph with two-hundred-meter grid lines. The resulting squares were labeled with letters

across the top and numbers on the left from top to bottom. Grid square J3 contained the Son Tay camp.

Camp Training Site

Construction and maintenance of a very precise training site at the C-2 range near Duke Field took many man-hours of labor. Raiders erected a full-scale layout of the Son Tay camp that had the exact geometry and dimensions of the real site. Foundations of every building and of every wall were carefully staked out with two-by-four studs in the ground. Raiders draped yards and yards of cloth on these studs to simulate the walls. Numerous doors and windowsills were also constructed and mounted in the proper places. Exact locations of every tree and brush were identified and potted miniatures placed in corresponding spots. On the western periphery, raiders bulldozed a shallow trench with a precise curve that simulated the Song Con River. They did the same to scrape out along the eastern side of the camp a road that ended at a full-scale mockup of one section of the bridge. They formed another trench that represented the irrigation canal on the south side. With all of this detail, each man could advance and count the number of steps he needed to take from one established position to the next. As elaborate as this site was, it was

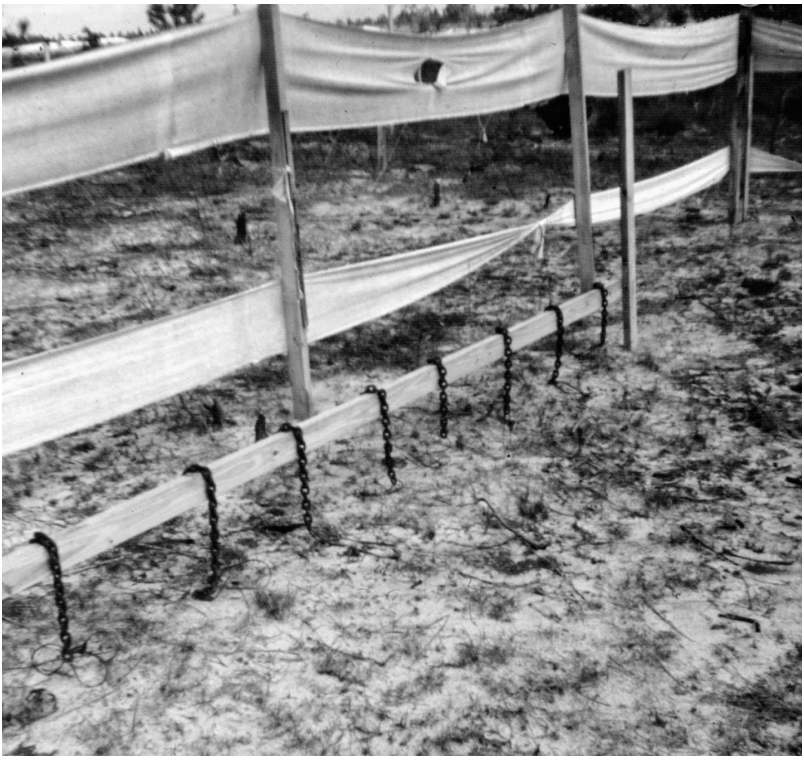
Cloth outlines representing the buildings at Son Tay. (USAF photo)

surprisingly small. The entire camp area from its southernmost buildings to the bridge would contain only three football fields laid side by side and lined up south to north.

The group's counterintelligence monitors expressed genuine concern over the construction details of this training site. They feared that the Soviet Cosmos 355 satellite that passed over Eglin twice during each twenty-four-hour period would produce photographs that could reveal the similarity of the training area to the actual Son Tay camp complex. They were inclined to have the cloth walls disassembled after every exercise. That would have been very labor intensive. A high-altitude photoreconnaissance flown by an OV-10 from Hurlburt Field satisfied the team's "spooks." The cloth walls were not distinct enough to suggest solid structures. The site looked like a stockyard in disrepair. Besides, there were other roads at the C-2 range that distorted the carefully engineered layout of the camp. In addition, the raiders constructed mock bridges and cinder block walls for the testing of custom-made demolition charges in close proximity that diminished the site's similarity to the real target. These additional structures made it highly unlikely that even the sharpest photo interpreter would identify the construction as the Son Tay camp.

Training records indicate that the raiders conducted at least 170 prac-

Two raiders moving along the cloth wall that represents the wall of the POW compound. (USAF photo)



The cloth wall of a POW cell training mockup, which included chains so that the raiders could practice freeing the POWs from their iron shackles. (USAF photo)

tice runs at the C-2 range. That does not mean that they did the entire raid sequence that many times. They practiced many phases of the raid in separate sessions, especially when they used live fire. Inert hand grenades were used for safety, but there were many training interruptions caused by tracers that ignited occasional grass and brushfires. Raiders executed all training and practice runs with such superb discipline that they did not sustain any weapons related injuries.

Air Force Special Operations Forces

The first thing the arriving Air Force crew members learned at Eglin AFB was that they would become part of a special joint service organization

headed by Brigadier General Manor, chief of the Air Force Special Operations Forces. They would conduct some unusual experimental flying, not only with Air Force helicopters and fighters but also with Army Special Forces helicopters from Fort Bragg. The air element of the Joint Contingency Task Group resembled a mini-wing with seventy-four rated airmen (including spares) who flew in two MC-130Es, five A-1Es, five HH-53s, one HH-3E, and two U.S. Army UH-1Hs. Manor delegated the management of this diverse fleet to Lieutenant Colonel Kraljev, who assumed the role of its commander, and to Maj. Richard A. Peshkin, who served as Kraljev's deputy and operations/training officer. Both were Special Operations staff officers from Air Force headquarters. Ben Kraljev was from the Special Operations Division of the Directorate of Operations and Dick Peshkin was from the Directorate of Plans. They had the enviable job of putting together well-trained helicopter and fighter formations that would stealthily deliver fifty-six Green Berets to Son Tay, provide them with necessary close air support during their ground operation, and then return them home along with the liberated prisoners of war. All this had to be done while most of the participants were kept in the dark about the real purpose of their unusual training.

Our leaders knew that they had assembled the best aircrews for the Ivory Coast project. But these hotshot airmen came from all over the world and had not flown together as dedicated crews even in their home units. The eleven-man Combat Talon crews, one from Ramstein Air Base in Germany and the other from Pope AFB in North Carolina, were made up of airmen who were crewed together just for this project. The Skyraider A-1E pilots were from the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, but their copilots came from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) in Thailand. This was done to blend instructor pilots and their know-how with pilots who had current combat experience in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Super Jolly Green HH-53 crews were mostly instructor pilots from the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center at Eglin AFB, with a mixture of pilots from Udorn RTAFB in Thailand and from Da Nang Air Base in the Republic of Vietnam. One HH-53 had Lt. Col. Royal C. Brown as pilot and Maj. Roy R. Dreibelbis as copilot. Both were from the 37th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Da Nang. Another HH-53 pilot was Maj. Kenneth D. Murphy from the 703rd Special Operations Squadron at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, while his copilot was Capt. William McGeorge from the 40th Rescue Squadron at Udorn. Maj. Frederic M. "Marty" Donohue had a full crew from

Eglin AFB. Maj. Herbert D. Kalen's original HH-3 copilot was Maj. David E. Vaughan from the 37th Rescue Squadron at Da Nang. The UH-1H Army Special Forces crew members came from two units at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (see appendix table 2, "Fruit Salad" Formation Aircraft, for a list of all the crew members).

The contrast between the Army and Air Force in living and training environments reflected many differences between the demands these two services placed on their personnel. It was not necessary to have a support detachment for the Air Force personnel at Eglin Main to parallel the one Special Forces formed at Duke Field. It was also not practical to house all Air Force participants in a single location. Most of the Jolly Green Giant helicopter crew members were assigned to Eglin and lived in their family homes. The same was true of the Skyraider pilots from Hurlburt. Most of the helicopter pilots who were recruited from Southeast Asia were billeted in bachelor officers quarters at Eglin and the fighter pilots at Hurlburt Field, but some opted to live in contracted local motels. All officers and most of the enlisted crew members of the Combat Talon C-130s and their support personnel lived at Eglin. Because enlisted quarters at

Air Force raiders from Eglin AFB observe the training of their ground troops at the C-2 range. (USAF photo)

Eglin were filled to capacity, some of the noncommissioned officer crew members were allowed to live in local motels. This was considered to be a normal temporary duty assignment for all who came from other locations. They were required to take care of their normal daily needs and be present for all assigned duties. This demanded dedicated self-discipline. Each man had to pay attention to daily schedules and provide his own transportation to work, day or night.

On one occasion the Green Beret staff allowed their troops to enjoy the recreation that was so readily available to the Air Force personnel. They took everyone by bus to a beach party. The troops enjoyed this outing tremendously and kept their guard up in mixing with the beachgoers, who included several female counterintelligence plants trying to solicit compromising mission information. Peach Three copilot Lt. Jim Paine joined the group, and his account is all that needs to be said about that occasion:

> Bull decided that everybody needed a break and the team was bused to the beach for a party. I had a car and met them there. Afterward 3 or 4 of us got into the car for the ride back to Duke Field. We stopped at a bar in downtown Ft. Walton where someone took offense to our being a little loud. They called the police and while I was in the bathroom, they got hauled off to jail. I tried to bail them out and got thrown in also. The First Sergeant got the ground troops out and Jerry Rhein got me out. It was not fun seeing General Manor or Bull the next day.[11]

There was no competition for crew positions among the Air Force raiders. All primary crew members were identified right from the beginning, and the few alternates knew that they would get to participate in the mission only if a primary member had to drop out for some reason. All alternates trained along with the primary members in normal and special tactics that were emerging during frequent experimental flying. There was no organized physical fitness training. Each man was responsible for maintaining his own combat-ready physical fitness conditioning. Each one would indulge in what suited him the best. Some would run, spend time in the gym playing basketball or handball with anyone who would show up, or pass the long daytime hours on the golf course or in a boat fishing in perhaps the best recreational fishing area in the world. It was

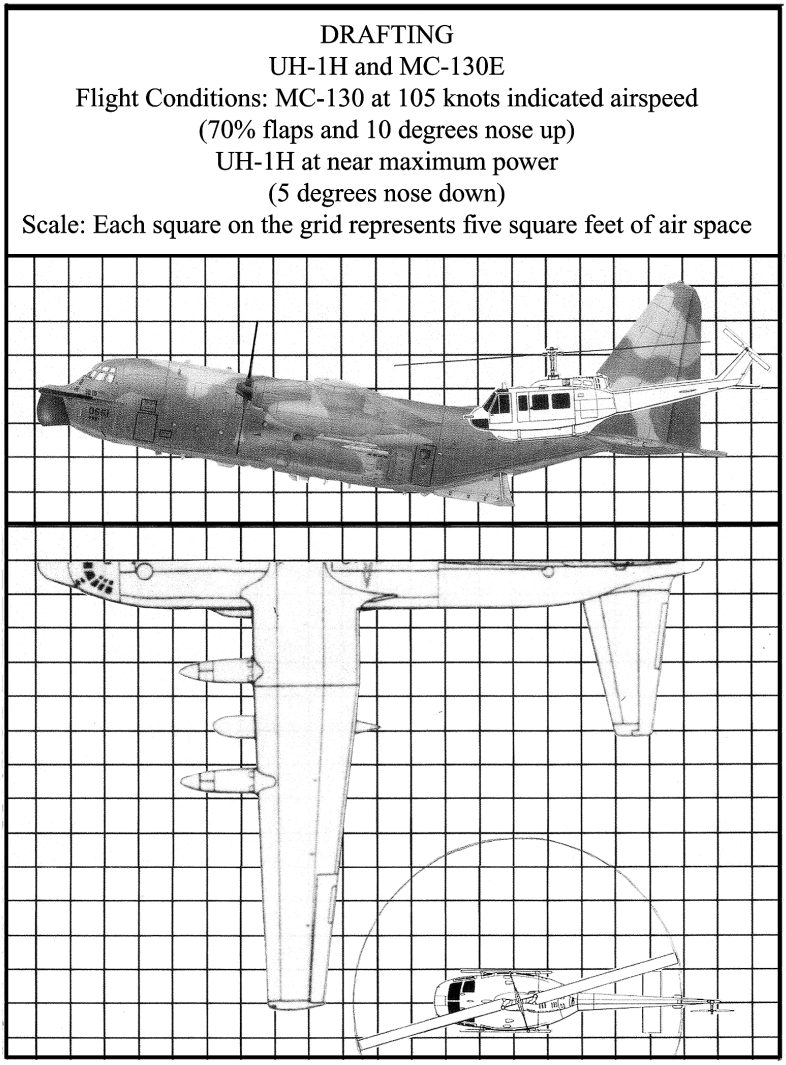
obvious that the physical fitness required of Air Force crews was much less demanding than that of their Green Beret counterparts.

Flying Training

No one now recalls who deserves credit for dreaming up the aircraft call signs. Major Peshkin announced them in his usual style—with a wide grin. They soon became such favorites that the planners decided to keep them for the actual mission. The helicopter formation that would carry the Green Berets became known as the Assault Formation. It would be led by an MC-130E(I) called Cherry One. The UH-1H or the HH-3E that would land in the Son Tay compound was named Banana, and the HH-53s were known as Apples One through Five. The second C-130, called Cherry Two, would lead the Skyraider A-1E Strike Formation consisting of Peaches One through Five. The complete assembly of diverse aircraft became known as the "Fruit Salad."

We became air component members of this unique Joint Contingency Task Group because of past combat experience in our aircraft. We could share information about each aircraft's capabilities and individual combat skills, but we needed a lot of closely coordinated work to forge ourselves into effective crews that would understand each other and fly together as a well-disciplined team. Our initial training was experimental and focused on the incorporation of the UH-1H into an unprecedented formation flight with a Combat Talon MC-130E(I). We had to find out how a Talon and a Huey could fly at the same airspeed. A fully loaded Huey could not fly by itself faster than 85 to 87 knots of indicated airspeed. However, this velocity could be increased in a drafting position behind a C-130. The question was just how slow a C-130 would have to fly to make such a drafting flight possible and safe. It was not just a matter of the slowest possible airspeed at which a C-130 could fly by itself. The specially configured Combat Talon had to maintain sufficient airspeed to retain acceptable flight control responses. These responses became very sluggish when the aircraft neared its stalling airspeed. Positive responses to flight controls were essential for many low-level maneuvers with no lights and a helicopter flying in a drafting position just off the left wing.

Helicopter drafting takes advantage of an airflow phenomenon over the aircraft's wings. When a C-130 wing passes through the air mass it compresses the air and causes the formation of a wave in its wake when the



Composite sketch showing the proximity of an Army Special Forces Huey to an Air Force MC-130E(I) during drafting. (Composite by John Gargus)

air seeks to reestablish its disturbed equilibrium. A helicopter can settle on the face of this wave and glide on it like a surfboard rider on a wave of water. Once in the proper position behind the wing a helicopter can attain higher airspeed without increasing its power setting. We learned quickly during daylight flights over the Gulf of Mexico that our highly skilled

pilots could do this by flying at a near stalling 105 knots of indicated airspeed with 70 percent flaps. We also discovered that if the pilots set their inboard engines at higher power than the outboard ones they could decrease the aircraft's stall speed and make the 105 knots more responsive to flight controls. It took fine manipulation to attain this optimum engine synchronization, but the pilots soon mastered it.

To establish the proper drafting position, the C-130 had to fly under the Huey, which had to drop down just aft of the left wing with its fuselage centered on the edge of the wing tip. Once in this position, the Huey's rotor blades almost overlapped the left wing, and the air currents generated by the wing boosted the helicopter's forward airspeed by 20 knots. This required enormous concentration on the part of the pilots of both aircraft. Even a slight increase in the C-130's airspeed or an unanticipated change in aircraft heading would cause the Huey to lose its drafting position and fall out of formation.

While the HH-53s could fly faster than the Huey, they maintained the same 105 knot airspeed. Two of them flew above and behind the Huey off the left wing, and the other three flew off the right wing in a V formation.

A daytime experimental Assault Formation flight led by an MC-130E(I) (Cherry One) with a UH-1H (Banana) and two HH-53s (Apples). (USAF photo)

Huey pilots were selected for their skill and experience. However, none of their prior experiences included a formation with a large fixed-wing aircraft. Air Force Major Donohue had prior UH-1 experience with the Royal Australian Air Force. He had also participated in experimental drafting (initially referred to as aerial surfing) with a C-130 and an HH-3. For this reason he accompanied the Army pilots on their initial experimental flights and shared his prior experiences in drafting and formation flying. We were all concerned over the difficult time both Huey pilots would have in a long night flight trying to stay in their narrowly defined drafting airspace. We could watch their faces during the day when they concentrated on spacing in relation to the leading C-130. It was unnerving to all of us to have a blade of a Huey that close to our aircraft's fuselage and the vertical stabilizer. Maybe it was good that our pilots could not look back to see what was beside them. They had to concentrate on the cockpit instruments in front of them. Huey pilots would draw two grease-pencil squares, circles, or Xs on the windows of their helicopters. These target marks would let them know that they were in optimum drafting positions when they could see the C-130's left wing tip centered in their

A daytime Assault Formation led by Cherry One over Eglin AFB. (USAF photo, adjusted by William Guenon)

left-hand framed space and the C-130 pilot's head in the center of the identically marked space in the right-side window. Those who observed one of the Huey's descents into its drafting position through the periscopic sextant from a C-130 experienced a unique, sobering sight. The sextant's telescopic magnification of the Huey's proximity made it appear that its rotor blades and the Talon's two left propellers were meshed together like synchronized gears. This view was very scary.

No one knew what our mission was going to be when we began flying with the Army Special Forces pilots. We suspected that it would be some kind of a rescue, but we had no idea where or when it would take place. Major Peshkin fed us bits of information every now and then, but we knew that his inputs were designed to keep us confused. He seemed to enjoy our state of bewilderment and would gladly add to it whenever we posed an inviting question. He was our taskmaster. He instructed Pope AFB navigators to prepare two four-hour-long training routes over Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. These were to be flown at various altitudes and at two different very slow airspeeds, over imaginary mountains, with formations of helicopters and Skyraider fighters. They were not to be too far apart because the two C-130s would have to be prepared to change formation leads in less than ten minutes. He issued these challenging requirements with the widest possible grin and a puff on his cigar. Ben Kraljev also smoked cigars, but he did not seem to enjoy our bewilderment as much as Dick Peshkin did.

It was not until after the arrival of the C-130 crew from Germany that Manor briefed the key pilots and navigators of both Combat Talons on the mission so that we could begin planning our eventual formation routes for the raid. What a thrilling revelation that briefing was! We were mesmerized by the audacity of the proposed plan and by our sudden realization that we could actually pull it off. We knew that we would be able to get the raiders into the prison area because we had gone there before in single aircraft operations during our tours in Vietnam. After that, the training routes that Peshkin ordered made good sense. We applied our best efforts to their refinement and to the planning of similar routes that would take us to Son Tay and back.

CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATION

Sluggish flight controls in slow formations were not the only problems we experienced in our training. In normal Combat Talon operations we

flew at 230-knot ground speeds and selected altitudes with continuous climbs and dives commanded by our APQ-115 terrain-following radar. The terrain-following computer was programmed to continue functioning on fixed 160-knot true airspeed input whenever the aircraft's velocity dropped below that level. Terrain following at Assault Formation's 105-knot and Strike Formation's 145-knot indicated airspeeds was completely outside the radar system's parameters. Besides, the Huey and the HH-3E, which had to draft on Cherry One's lead, could not maintain drafting under sustained climbing and diving conditions. Our fully combat loaded A-1E Skyraiders had problems maintaining their flight-planned airspeeds during climbs. Consequently, both formations had to avoid frequent altitude changes and execute them very carefully during straight flight legs, especially when the terrain ahead dictated a climb to a higher altitude.

We also learned to our dismay that the slow in-flight airspeeds degraded our electronic navigational capabilities. The APQ-115 radar was designed for a high-performance (F-4 type) aircraft. It was already operating within its lower parameters when flown at our normal airspeeds. At formation speeds and 70 percent flaps the aircraft flew with a 10-degree nose high attitude, which exceeded its radar antenna's mechanical design that allowed for only 1.5 degrees of aircraft pitch-up. This was not such a big problem when we used the radar in its mapping mode, in which the navigators could use a 15-degree down-tilt control to compensate for the aircraft's nose high attitude. The problem was when we used the radar in a terrain-avoidance flight. Here the antenna sweep was slaved to the horizontal plane of the aircraft along its longitudinal axis. With this necessary feature, whenever the aircraft's pitch increased by more than 1.5 degrees, the horizontal plane of the antenna sweep was tilted upward. At our slow-flight aircraft attitude this tilt would be 8.5 degrees up. Our corresponding radar indicator presentation, which was supposed to show only those returns that were at or above the aircraft's altitude, became flawed. The radar would no longer show hazardous terrain that was directly ahead at or slightly above the aircraft's flight level. Consequently, navigators, who had to rely on radar's terrain-avoidance mode, had to use it with this false horizontal orientation in mind.

Slow in-flight airspeeds also affected our Doppler radar, which provided continuous wind drift and ground speed information. Quite often the Doppler could not process received flight data and would resort to stored memory operation that would provide less than reliable cross-track

information (wind effect perpendicular to track). This would normally happen during aircraft heading changes. Because the Doppler drift input was used to slave the center of the APQ-115 radar antenna sweep to the aircraft's projected track, the radar indicator's image alignment did not display returns on their proper bearing in relation to the aircraft's projected path over the terrain. This was another factor that the navigators had to keep in mind.

The APQ-115 radar was never adequate for ground-mapping navigation. It had only a 90-degree look angle, which covered a pie wedge sector of space ahead of the aircraft. This was a sufficient backup for high-speed terrain-following flights during which the aircraft hugged the terrain at selected altitudes, but it provided minimal navigational assistance when flying over terrain that was devoid of prominent landmarks and significant manmade structures. This was precisely the type of environment our formations would find over Laos and upon entry into North Vietnam. Radar would display mountain ranges and ridgelines with their shape changing shadows as the aircraft approached them, but it would not show most of the small rivers concealed by dense jungle. These jungle rivers would be invisible to the naked eye even during full moonlight. Therefore, in the absence of positive en route checkpoints, navigators would have to use the radar in its mapping and terrain-avoidance modes. This way they would have to monitor relative positions of approaching hills and ridgelines, ensuring that the lead aircraft was maintaining its position in the center of the flight-planned formation corridor.

INNOVATIONS IN NAVIGATION

Thanks to the newly promoted Lt. Col. Larry Ropka the radar mapping problem was resolved. Larry was a navigator who understood the Combat Talon's navigational capabilities. He had good personal contacts with a number of individuals within the Washington intelligence community and was able to identify and borrow two infrared devices that the CIA employed on one of its prior operations. He arranged for their installation on our two aircraft even before the start of formation training. This forward-looking infrared (FLIR) instrument turned the night into day. It permitted navigators to look forward and directly beneath the aircraft and clearly see objects that appeared only as bright blobs on their radar indicators. Small rivers, hidden to the naked eye, became visible on this marvelous device that could distinguish between the river and shore tem-

peratures and reveal the cooler water flow hidden beneath the vegetation. The addition of this new navigational aid ensured that navigators could positively identify each en route turning point and maintain the flight plan track to the target. It also guaranteed that Cherry One's navigator would be able to see a television-like picture of the Son Tay compound from fifteen hundred feet before he would command the loadmasters to toss out the illumination flares at H-hour.

Securing the FLIR instrument necessitated the addition of one more navigator to each C-130 crew. This was no problem. The Ramstein crew arrived with a spare navigator, Capt. James F. McKenzie Jr. We requested that Capt. Norman C. Mazurek from Pope AFB, recently returned from a tour of duty at Nha Trang Air Base in Vietnam, be added to the Pope crew. Because Mazurek was also an intelligence officer and had been in mission planning while in Vietnam, he immediately joined the planning group at Eglin.

The helicopter pilots experimented with night vision starlight telescopes and electronic binoculars that were under development at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory at Fort Belvoir. The lab was happy to get some early test data in exchange for an opportune equipment loan. Much-improved night vision goggles are now standard issue to crew members for nighttime operations, but in 1970 our pilots pioneered their employment in combat. The goggles we tested were primitive instruments by today's standards. They allowed us to see in the dark but were difficult to use because the images "smeared" unless the user moved his head very slowly. During the combat phase of the raid they would prove their worth in locating desirable landing spots and in monitoring enemy troop movements while the engine-idling helicopters awaited recall in their safe holding areas.

We also found new uses for old equipment. To assist the C-130s in relocating spread-out helicopters after the Assault Formation breakup, we tested and adapted a ground-to-air transponder normally used on the ground to mark targets or drop zones. This small box contained a transmitter that could be activated by airborne radar. It repeated a coded signal that originated in an approaching aircraft. With these devices mounted on the Banana and two Apples it was easy to locate the helicopters when we approached them from the rear. In addition, coded signals helped us to distinguish the helicopters from abundant ground clutter that often saturated radar displays.

Another old but to us new idea was to use parachute-dropped

BLU-27/B napalm bombs to serve as long burning ground markers for orbiting A-1E fighters and other objective area aircraft. Our loadmasters and flight engineers embraced the napalm bomb as a challenge and with great enthusiasm. They helped Eglin carpenters to design and build special wooden cradles that allowed the Talons to jettison the firebombs from the ramp. After that they designed the necessary parachute riggings and developed appropriate drop sequence checklists. In addition to the napalm bombs, there were other unconventional items that they would have to practice delivering. These were Mark 8 parachute illumination flares, MK-6 log flare markers, and ground battle simulators. All required manual arming and airdrop delivery.

The A-1Es tested and adapted MK-20 Mod II Rockeye cluster bombs for attacking vehicles and anything that would turn up on objective area roads. They also flew test runs with very high frequency (VHF) jammers far away from land over the Gulf of Mexico. These jammers would be used on the raid to deny air defense controllers voice communication with MIG alert aircraft. They would be installed on Peaches One, Three, and Five by a team from the Air Force Logistics Command that deployed with the raiders to the Skyraider home base at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. Peach Five pilot Maj. John C. Squires developed a close relationship with the team. He recalls the following:

> Testing had to be done in the middle of the night because it screwed up television reception for many miles up and down the coast. I don't remember his name, but the young captain in charge was an electrical engineer, who, I was led to understand, designed all the wiring for the F-15. Installing the test system at Hurlburt really gave him a fit, as either the jammer or the dedicated power supply was interfering with everything in the cockpit. He tried every procedure he knew to prevent it and finally made a trip to the commissary and wrapped the whole damn problem in aluminum foil. It worked![12]

The A-1Es also flew many nonformation hours training Army Special Forces as forward air guides, who, unlike forward air controllers, direct aerial attacks from the ground rather than from a spotter aircraft. The guides and the pilots developed great respect for each other. The pilots gave the guides A-1E orientation rides so that they could appreciate the air maneuvering necessary to engage ground targets. In the process the

forward air guides risked exposure to showing off by the pilots. To get even, they teased the pilots about their ability to hit some targets. They conned young and flamboyant Lt. Jim Paine into a beer bet that he could not hit a red fire truck. Then they put a toy fire truck on the range and tasked him to destroy it. Jim saw the small red object and managed to put two bullet holes through it. He not only won his bet but also earned much respect for the competence of all Peach pilots.

The HH-53s did not require much specialized training. Other than flying in formation at night, their tasking would not be that much different from what they did routinely on normal daytime search-and-rescue missions. We needed some of them to practice dropping flares as backups for Cherry One. One of the Super Jolly Green Giants would have to train as a gunship for neutralizing guard towers and prison guard barracks before the Green Berets landed inside the courtyard. Objective area spacing and safety were their major considerations. They had to maintain a safe aircraft separation on their arrival, landing, and retreat to their assigned holding zones. The same caution would apply on their controlled departure from the area.

Pilots who had to make the hazardous landing inside the POW camp's courtyard had the biggest challenge. Even though the exact positions of all tree trunks were clearly marked on the ground, practicing landings in the improvised mockup would not prepare them for a descent through the treetops. That could never be simulated. Actual practice landing at a carbon copy of a compound with trees would ruin one helicopter on each try.

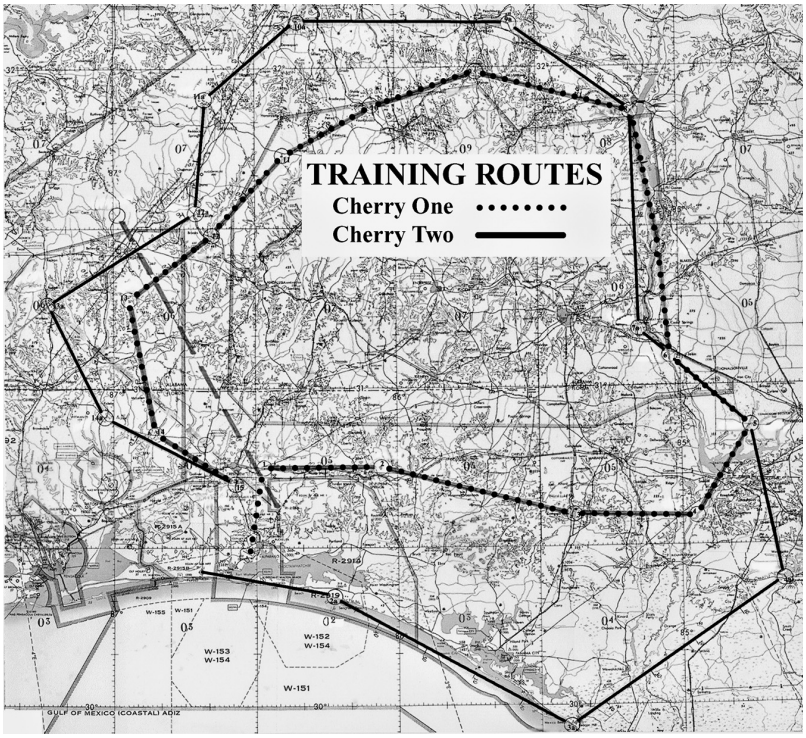
Stateside training routes approximated the ones we would fly over Laos and North Vietnam in elapsed time, distances, and altitudes. They included anticipated climbs and descents that could be sustained by both helicopter and fighter formations. We flew them over and over at night with the two Talons alternating as Cherry One or Cherry Two. We practiced numerous in-flight formation lead changes between the two Cherries. Such switching of roles necessitated formation breakups and new join-ups with appropriate timing adjustments between the formations so that the Assault Formation reached the initial point two minutes ahead of the Strike Formation. Initial point (IP) is the last planned turning point from which aircraft take up their final approach to the objective area. On our mission this would also be the point at which both Fruit Salad forma-

tions would begin to break up, with each aircraft assuming its assigned role in the raid.

The formation routes provided very good training for the pilots who had to devote their full attention to maintaining level flight within the narrow limits of desired airspeeds and with precise rates of turn and careful, gentle climbs and descents. It was also good training for crew coordination, intercom communication, and practice for eventual radio silence with no electronic voice transmissions between the various aircraft. But these flights offered very little practical training for the electronic warfare officers (EWOs), who could not monitor the Soviet-made Spoonrest, Firecan, and Fansong radars they would encounter on the actual mission. There was no way to simulate those signals over the southeastern United States. They did get some practice on special flights against a nearby radar bomb-scoring site and against some friendly fighter interceptors.

The navigators got a lot of practice in manipulating time intervals between the formations and during various serpentine leg segments that were designed to lose time for the A-1E Strike Formation. But as far as the point-to-point navigation was concerned, the training was not realistic. Map-reading navigators, who stood on the right behind copilots, and map-reading pilots, who stood on the left behind the aircraft commanders, had too many easily identifiable checkpoints to help them to keep the aircraft right on track. Radar navigators had many rivers, lakes, dams, and other easily identifiable manmade targets for easy orientation, but there were no ten-thousand-foot peaks and corresponding valleys to fly through in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. It would not be like that at all over dark Laotian jungles and mountain ranges on the way to the Vietnam's Red River Valley. Their best navigational training came from the television-like FLIR. It was a new instrument for them, and they became proficient in its use very quickly. Clarity of the picture depended on the tuning skills of each operator. In short, it became an excellent antidote for the mapping shortcomings of our radar. FLIR ensured that formations would be able to fly the centerlines of their six-mile wide corridors.

The objective area of our training routes was a carbon copy of the actual target area layout. Even though its terrain was different, everything from the initial point to the prison mockup had the same dimensions, headings, and bearings. This was of utmost importance because, once the lead C-130s abandoned their formations, each aircraft assumed its assigned role and proceeded to its designated landing zone or orbit at a different altitude and airspeed.



This map shows the "Fruit Salad" training routes over Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. Distances correspond to those between Udorn RTAFB and Son Tay for the helicopters that took off from Eglin AFB and between Nakhon Phanom RTAFB and Son Tay for the A-1E fighters that took off from Hurlburt Field. (Computer scan photo by John Gargus)

Flying Safety

There was continuous and unprecedented flying safety awareness on the part of everyone. The only tolerable aircraft loss would come with Banana's landing and abandonment inside the Son Tay compound. None of the Combat Talon crew members will ever forget their formation flights with the Huey. As noisy as the C-130s were, the slap, slap, slap sounds of the Huey's rotor blades against the left side of the fuselage were clearly discernible. We were continuously aware of the small piece of airspace we had to share. It still frightens me when I think back at what might

have happened to the whole Ivory Coast project had there been a mid-air collision between a Huey and a C-130. How could such a collision be explained? What was an Air Force aircraft doing flying in formation with an Army helicopter in a scenario where both aircraft were exceeding their designed flight specification limits? In Southeast Asia such an event could be written off as an unfortunate combat training loss, but not at home over Florida, Georgia, or Alabama. Our Joint Contingency Task Group would surely have been disbanded and the careers of future Lieutenant General Manor and Colonels Kraljev and Peshkin brought to an inglorious end. That is what happens after aircraft accidents. Commanders and training officers of units involved always end up biting the bullet. But none of that happened during 1,054 hours of flying training. We must give due credit for the safe flying training to those who led us. They provided everything we needed to succeed. They trusted our professionalism and motivated us to perform at our best. They were also the best we could have had.

Air Operations Planning

Planning at Eglin AFB was even more secretive than the flying training. Fewer people were involved. The mission objective and its location had to be kept from some tactical planners and eventual raid participants until they had to be included in the final preparations just prior to our deployment to Thailand. Everyone sensed that Ivory Coast would result in some very important operation. The uninitiated ones were patient and understanding in working with those who had the full picture of what was ahead.

Just as with our flying training, planning leadership was vested in Ben Kraljev. His principal associates were Larry Ropka and Dick Peshkin. Ben had experience in the C-130s and, as Air Staff's officer of primary responsibility for the Combat Talon program, was well versed in the capabilities of its aircraft. He also had the unique distinction of having served in Vietnam on a little-known C-119 exchange program with the French before they lost their colonial conflict with Ho Chi Minh.

Larry Ropka was the most experienced planner on our staff. He had several years of experience in various clandestine special operations in Southeast Asia, which had earned him induction into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1969. In his Pentagon assignment, he was the Air Staff's

officer of primary responsibility for the Heavy Chain program that used C-130 aircraft with Combat Talon navigational capabilities. Larry began his planning involvement at the very inception of the POW rescue idea. He always seemed to have more information about the whole operation than anyone else. He not only seemed to know who was doing what but also where and how to get whatever we needed. He was a navigator who drew the initial invasion routes that were used for briefing the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Larry spent much of his time away from Eglin, coordinating various matters and procuring much of the special equipment we used. He also did much of the planning and coordinating on getting the task force, with all needed resources, to the staging bases in Southeast Asia.

Dick Peshkin had prior experience in Vietnam as a C-123 pilot and operations officer in the Ranch Hand program that conducted Agent Orange defoliation. He proved to be an excellent leader, motivator, and spinner of deceptive stories for those who were not yet in the know.

The largest Air Force planning group consisted of Combat Talon officer crew members. From the 7th Special Operations Squadron at Ramstein AB it had Maj. Irl L. "Leon" Franklin, aircraft commander, with Capt. Thomas L. Stiles as his lead navigator. From Detachment 2 at Pope AFB there were Lt. Col. Albert P. "Friday" Blosch, aircraft commander, with Maj. Harry L. Pannill as first pilot, myself (Maj. John Gargus) as radar navigator, and Lt. Col. Cecil M. Clark as electronic warfare officer (EWO). Cecil Clark and I had been mission planners at Nha Trang AB. Both of us had flown into the Red River Valley on clandestine low-level missions before. We understood the North Vietnamese air defenses and knew that we could design routes that would sneak the raiding force into the objective area without radar detection. (See appendix table 3, Air Force Planners.)

Other Air Force planners with whom we coordinated regularly were key helicopter and fighter pilots. Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton, operations and training officer from the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service at Eglin AFB, had served on the SACSA's Feasibility Study Group and became the leader of the helicopter planning group. He would be the only one of the Washington Air Force planners to fly in the raid. His group included Lt. Col. John V. Allison, pilot of Apple Two; Maj. Frederic M. Donohue, pilot of gunship Apple Three; and Maj. Herbert D. Kalen, pilot of Banana. Maj. Edwin J. Rhein Jr., from the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, represented the A-1E fighter pilots.

He had a distinguished record as a Raven, a forward air controller flying in support of Laotian forces. He was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1997. All of these officers were at their home bases and managed to carry on their normal daily routines in addition to the secret planning and training that their assignment to the Ivory Coast project required. Our coordination meetings with them were held during their daytime duty hours at their secure facilities.

There were several nonflying members of our planning group who worked with us. Two of them did not have any training duties and were totally dedicated to our planning effort. They were Air Force Capt. James A. Jacobs, photo interpreter, and Marine Corps 1Lt. James A. Brinson, an expert on North Vietnamese Army ground forces. Both were from the Defense Intelligence Agency.

We also had planners whose tasks required them to be away from Eglin most of the time. They were Air Force Maj. Arthur A. Andraitis, photo interpreter from the Air Force's Directorate of Intelligence Systems. He came by frequently and worked on obtaining the most recent low- and high-altitude photographs of the Son Tay area. He also provided us with photographs of navigational checkpoints so that we could verify their visibility and suitability for nighttime navigation. Then there was Capt. John H. Knops, intelligence expert from Air Force headquarters, who provided us with "need-to-know" enemy order of battle information.

Air Force Maj. Keith R. Grimes was our Southeast Asia weather specialist. His services became indispensable once we arrived in Thailand. Educated as both a meteorologist and a geologist, he learned much about the Southeast Asia land mass in Laos when the U.S. Special Forces established weather observation links at various outposts known as Lima Sites. Because he knew the terrain as well as the airspace above, he was pulled from his Air University assignment to join the raid planning staff. Keith continued to serve in special operations as a weather specialist after the raid. His colleagues recognized his contributions to the Air Force special operations by inducting him into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1996. While at Eglin, he functioned as our liaison with the Army and spent most of his time with the Special Forces at Duke Field. Because he always wore fatigues with a baseball cap, some of our C-130 crew members believed that he was an Army major. Keith also worked extensively with the forward air guides and coordinated on radio communication procedures between various raiding elements. As busy as he was with the Special Forces, he did not let that interfere with his plans to get married

before our deployment to Thailand. His original plan was to get married in June, but his assignment to the Feasibility Study Group and then to the Ivory Coast project kept delaying his nuptials from one month to the next. He finally succeeded in marrying his bride Pat on 16 October 1970. Simons, Sydnor, and Meadows were the only guests at their wedding, which took place at the Eglin AFB chapel after one of our joint planning meetings.[13]

Next there was Lt. Col. Homer Willett from the Air Staff's Directorate of Operations, where he served as the branch chief for air surveillance in the Air Defense Division. He was our expert on radars, communications, and command and control. His task was to arrange the command and control net that Brigadier General Manor would need during the raid's execution. He was definitely the right man at the right place and time. He had spent more than the equivalent of two years in Southeast Asia on temporary duty assignments for various radar and communications projects. He knew most of the commanders whose cooperation would be needed to make the necessary pre-raid arrangements. All had either worked with him or for him on his frequent visits to Southeast Asia. Consequently, he had no problems when he requested unusual commitments from them. He did not work with the group at Eglin because most of his stateside coordinating tasks were with the Air Defense Command and his command and control arrangements would be made only after our arrival in the war zone.

There was also one significant air operations planner in Washington whom we did not get to see at all. He was Air Force Lt. Col. John E. Kennedy from the Pacific Air Defense Analysis Facility and was known as the National Security Agency's expert on North Vietnam's air defense network. Larry Ropka and Jack Knops kept him abreast of our planning in Florida. He reviewed our flight routes with Larry and provided much useful air defense intelligence to us through Jack.

All of our leaders, from Brigadier General Manor on down, showed complete confidence in our ability to accomplish every assigned task. Practically everything we needed—maps, photographs, and intelligence information on the enemy's order of battle—were made available to us. Manor was a frequent visitor to our work sessions. This gave us an opportunity to share with him everything we were doing and contemplating. He was a good listener and always made us feel that we had his full understanding and approval. He brought in high-ranking visitors from the Pentagon to be briefed on our mission. He let us conduct the briefings

and answer questions that would come up. Kraljev, Ropka, and Peshkin followed suit and likewise deferred to our expertise.

Manor gave us full after-duty-hour use of his conference room. Our planning went on every night unless there was a training flight. There were time-outs for visits to the base theater or a local restaurant. The conference room was restored to its normal décor after each session. All paperwork generated by the planners was promptly stamped TOP SECRET and secured in the safe when not in use. All classified waste paper was similarly treated and prepared for destruction. Two counterintelligence officers, Army Maj. Max E. Newman and Air Force Maj. Richard S. Beyea Jr., were ever present, monitoring our every step. They stuck to us like glue. They were the only nonplanners of the group. We included them in all our planning activities, but they never shared their security operations with us. We understood their role and respected their close presence.

Beyea was our frequent companion at bars and restaurants. We certainly visited a good number of them because we avoided frequenting the same places. He had a rental car, so we would use him as a convenient means of transportation. But he would also turn up no matter where we went without him, and often he would be there even before we arrived. At times he would pretend not to know us and avoid joining our group. We got used to him. We knew that he was not just keeping his eyes on us but that he was also watching to see if some enemy counterpart was shadowing us.

Newman, known as "Blue Max," was very unique. He loved his security counterintelligence role. Any similarity between him and the TV secret agent Maxwell Smart was consciously intentional. He enjoyed the comical aspect of his image and worked on living up to it. In contrast to Beyea, his presence was seldom known to us, and we assumed that he was spending most of his time shadowing Army personnel. He would change rental cars periodically in order to avoid being conspicuous with his presence at local hangouts. He had us believing that he wore disguises. Since no one had ever caught him at it, he either did not resort to such tactics or was so skillful at concealing his identity that he moved among us without being detected. Thirty years later he confided to me that his favorite disguise was that of a beach bum hippie. There was a considerable transient hippie population in the touristy Emerald Coast of Florida at that time.

There was one other Air Force counterintelligence officer whom we saw very infrequently. We suspected that Maj. Thomas E. Macomber

from USAF headquarters was developing a new concept for operational security. Unlike Beyea and Newman, he did not spend all his time at Eglin and did not socialize with us. He flew with us on various aircraft and paid attention to our crew's communications discipline. He assisted Manor in obtaining from Goodfellow AFB the services of counterintelligence personnel who tapped our phones and monitored their use in an effort to figure out what we were doing at Eglin.

We had very little contact with Manor's office staff, which provided administrative support. Either Newman or Beyea took care of our needs in this area. During daytime duty hours someone in the office accomplished all classified or routine typing and reproduction. We did not interface with the office staff until after we returned from the raid. Then we dealt with them directly on mission reports, recommendations for awards and decorations, and crew member effectiveness reports that covered the period of our assignment to the Ivory Coast project.

ROUTE PLANNING

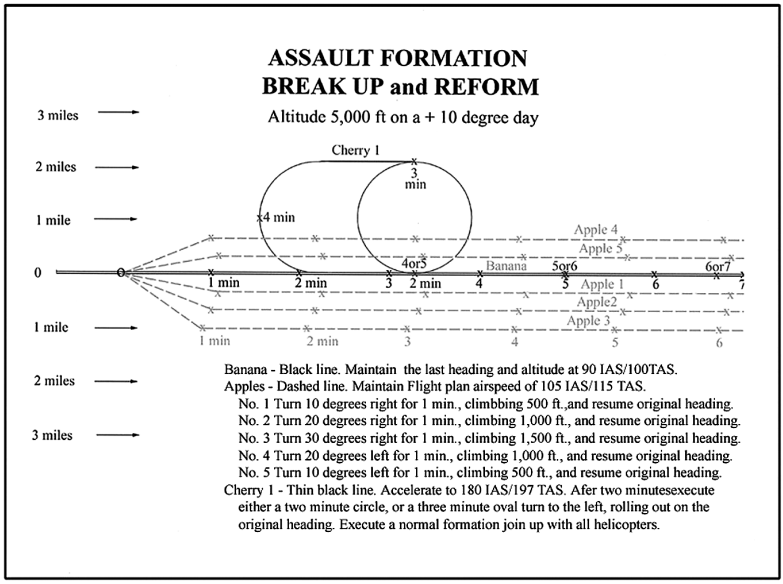
As mission planners we had to overcome several problems that we had not experienced in our prior operations over North Vietnam. Fortunately, we had an ideal environment for dealing with traditional planning obstacles. We were free to improvise and develop new tactics that allowed us to focus on the desired outcome of the mission without the constraints that had governed flight planning during our tours in Vietnam. We knew how to send in a single aircraft on a low-level terrain-following mission that, with up-to-date intelligence, could avoid the enemy's surface-to-air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft artillery (AAA) defenses. The task now was to design flight paths for formations of dissimilar aircraft that had to fly at airspeeds mandated by the performance limitations of the slowest aircraft. The Assault Formation would fly at 105 knots indicated airspeed, which matched the maximum drafting speed attainable by the UH-1H, and the Strike Formation would have to control its flight time on a separate route at 145 knots. Both formations would have to remain close enough to each other to allow Cherry Two to take over the formation lead from Cherry One should it experience in-flight difficulties such as loss of an engine or problems with navigational equipment. Timing over the target was not fixed, but Cherry Two was to bring its A-1Es (Peaches) to the common initial point eleven miles out of Son Tay not earlier than two minutes after Cherry One crossed it with its helicopters.

Required separation between formations in time and distance dictated that the fighters fly a more serpentine route with larger heading changes than those of the helicopters. There was a relatively narrow area over which we could penetrate into North Vietnam. We had uncharted mountain ranges over which our formations would not dare to fly just to the south of our intended route. All terrain under our flight paths had to be clearly and accurately charted. To the north of our route was North Vietnam's western early warning radar at Na San. To avoid a line-of-sight exposure to its rotating beams we had to hide behind mountain ridges and fly as far south of it as possible, while staying very close to the uncharted terrain.

Development of final flight plans for the two formations took a long time. We made almost nightly revisions to inbound routes, incorporating suggestions of pilots and other participants within the planning group. We used navigational charts of different scales to study terrain elevation contour lines, ensuring that proposed flight tracks would give our formations thousand-foot altitude clearance within their respective six-mile-wide maneuvering corridors. These six-mile-wide corridors were needed to ensure that the lead Cherries had enough safe airspace to perform several contingency maneuvers. We felt that some aircraft, notably the Banana, might lose their drafting positions and drop out of the formation. If that happened, all helicopters would need to climb, spread out, and continue on their original heading while Cherry One would circle and return under the scattered helicopters to reestablish the formation.

Strike Formation would use a very similar rejoin procedure if the A-1Es lost sight of their lead aircraft. We anticipated that the fighter formation would most likely have to lose time in order to adjust its flight progress to that of the helicopter formation. Arrival at checkpoints could be delayed by having the fighters fly "S" turn legs, making turns of 30 and 60 degrees every two minutes. To ensure that Cherry Two with the A-1Es arrived at the initial point two minutes after the helicopters, Cherry One had to break radio silence and report its projected arrival time for turning points 4, 7, and 11. Turning point 11 was also our initial point. Then it would be up to Cherry Two to speed up or slow down in order to meet the desired time delay at the initial point.

To ensure proper terrain clearances we plotted each leg of the inbound tracks on 1:50,000 scale maps that showed twenty-meter elevation contour lines. We studied the contour lines of all hills and mountains that were within three miles of each track. We also requested photographs of all turning points and prominent geographical features that could be used

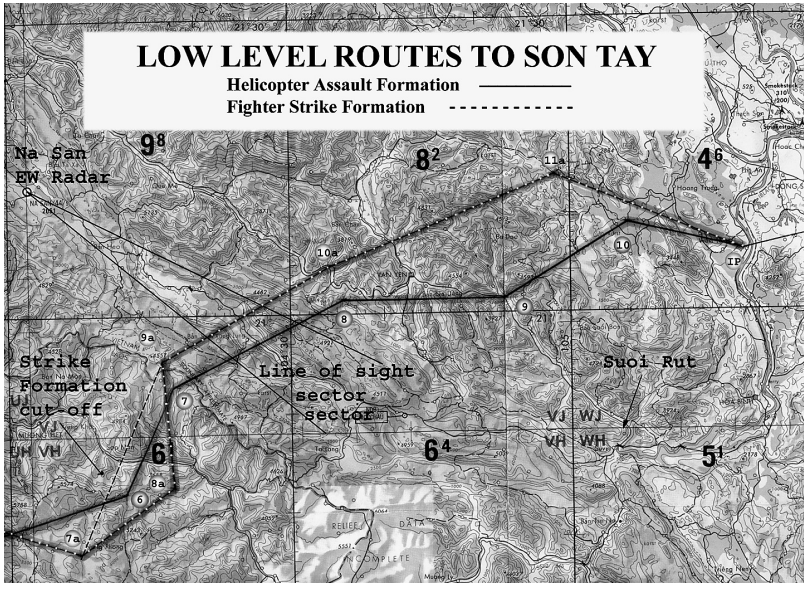


This sketch depicts what would happen to the helicopter formation if the drafting HH-3 were to drop out of formation. The HH-3 would continue on its last heading. HH-53s would spread out, and the MC-130E would speed up and turn around to fly under the HH-3. A drafting condition could be restored in five to seven minutes. (Sketch by John Gargus)

as navigational checkpoints. Photographs provided by Major Andraitis showed that some of the selected turning points were of questionable visibility even for the FLIR. So we had to pick new turning points, which meant drawing new tracks and reexamining each new six-mile-wide corridor on these most detailed maps.

The pilots of our planning group had one important concern. They preferred an ever descending flight into the objective area so that each leg of flight would be at the same or a lower altitude, never higher than the previous one. This was important for the Assault Formation with Banana because even a gradual, very slow climb would strain the performance of this helicopter. Cherry One would be confronted with a near stall airspeed and attitude, and the helicopter would have a difficult time maintaining the airspeed needed to stay in the drafting position. Fortunately, the terrain over which our formations were to fly met this requirement. It was possible to plan each leg of flight for both formations at the same or lower altitude than the one that preceded it.

Our most intensive terrain study focused on the area just southeast of Na San's early warning radar. Both formations had to fly within thirty miles of it shortly after entering North Vietnam. With the six-mile-wide safe terrain clearance requirement it was not possible to avoid flying within the line of sight of its location. Captain Knops could not provide us with the precise elevation of its rotating antenna and was unable to determine whether this radar was modified with a moving target identification feature. Radars with this capability do not show stationary targets or landmarks; their indicators display only those returns that are in motion. We used graph paper to plot elevations of mountain ridgelines between the radar and each tenth of a mile along the formation tracks to determine our exposure to the line-of-sight radar beam. Such tedious plotting revealed that the fighter formation would be exposed intermittently for close to three minutes and the helicopter formation for more than four minutes. If the radar did not have the moving target identification feature, which we knew was the situation at the time Cecil Clark and I



This map shows Assault and Strike Formation routes from the Laos border to the initial point (IP). Note the location of the Na San early warning radar and its line-of-sight view of both formations. Strike Formation skipped point 8a to gain time. Suoi Rut had an air defense listening post somewhere between helicopter points 9 and 10. (Computer scan photo by John Gargus)

served in Vietnam, target returns from both formations would probably blend in with the surrounding terrain returns. If so, Vietnamese radar operators could miss a few extra blobs on their indicators that merely changed their size and shape. But if the enemy had modified this radar, operators on duty would see several clear blips on a dark background as the formations moved in and out from behind the shadowing mountains. Transit of our formations through this region would occur thirty-six to thirty minutes before the time over the Son Tay POW camp. We assumed that the Na San radar had not been modified. We also hoped that its radar operators would be monitoring higher-flying intruders.

MIG TRAP SCENARIO

To ensure that both formations would sneak in undetected, we counted on a tactic that would be interpreted by the enemy as a MIG trap scenario. On many prior occasions the Air Force and Navy had collaborated in trapping and shooting down Vietnamese interceptors. Either one or the other would challenge the enemy's air defenses by inviting a commitment of MIGs instead of surface-to-air missiles. If this happened and MIGs became airborne against Navy fighters from the east, Air Force fighters would appear from the west and place MIGs at a disadvantage when they started running low on fuel and had to return to their bases. The Navy had used the same tactic when Air Force fighters got challenged in the west. We wanted to ensure that the enemy would not use MIG interceptors on the night of the raid because these could be very successful against our fleet of C-130s, A-1Es, and helicopters. Without knowing how many aircraft the Navy would employ in creating a diversion in the Haiphong area, we expected their fighters to penetrate into North Vietnam from the Gulf of Tonkin before our group's fighters appeared from over the mountains in the west. The F-4s would set up a MIG combat air patrol (MIGCAP) in the airspace above Phuc Yen Air Base. This would signal a possible MIG trap, and so the hope was that the North Vietnamese would then commit themselves to a missile defense rather than an interceptor defense. Consequently, we planned to use our high-performance fighters as bait and divert the enemy's attention from what we wanted to do at low level and on the ground.

Timing of this high-altitude fighter diversion was critical. The Navy needed to become visible to the enemy's eastern early warning radars about forty-five minutes before our attack on Son Tay. This activity in

the east would certainly increase the alertness of the early warning operators at Na San. They would detect the high-flying Air Force fighters approaching from northern Laos some fifteen to twenty minutes later. These distractions were intended to increase the chances for both formations to traverse the vulnerable southeastern radar coverage sector of Na San without detection.

SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILE (SAM) CONCERNS

The original plans considered but did not include employment of F-105 Wild Weasels that were normally used on Air Force bombing strikes to engage the enemy's SAM defenses. Soviet built SA-2 "Guideline" missiles were readily available to the North Vietnamese, and they proved to be very effective against unprotected high-flying jet aircraft. We envisioned that MIGCAP F-4s would serve as bait for drawing SAM fire and that they would be able to defend themselves with their own tactics and ordnance. The F-105s were included in the final scenario only after the raiding force deployed to Thailand. This proved to be a very good late addition to the anticipated MIG trap scenario.

WHO GETS THE BANANA ROLE?

Decision to substitute the Air Force HH-3E for the Army Special Forces UH-1H was a matter of considerable debate in our small planning group. All of us believed that it would be very appropriate to have an Army helicopter deliver the main rescue force. That would make the airborne part of the raid a truly joint operation.

There were several problems with the UH-1H. The only advantage it seemed to have was that it had a shorter rotor blade and would thus have more room for a landing inside the small Son Tay courtyard. Since it lacked the necessary range to get to the target area with its normal fuel load, there was a proposal to pre-position it with the Blueboy Group at an en route Special Forces camp in Laos. It would take off from there with the raiders and join the Assault and Strike Formations on their inbound route to Son Tay. While that scenario would resolve the fuel endurance problem, it would create some new ones. Special Forces outposts in Laos were subjected to periodic attacks, and we did not want any surprises. A pre-positioned Huey would also lack proper maintenance support at an isolated Lima Site location. What if it turned up with a mechanical

problem? Things could go wrong with takeoff and join-up timing. This would create complications for both formations. Aircraft would have to establish brief radio contact to join up safely. That would violate the radio silence requirement on the approach to North Vietnam.

We managed to modify both Hueys with extra fuel bladders in one of the gunner wells. This gave them sufficient range, but it reduced the amount of space available for the battle-dressed Green Berets in the Blueboy Group. The plan called for fourteen Green Berets, but a bladder-modified Huey could cram in only eleven. Our training routes did not have eleven men flying along. Flight conditions in drafting were just too hazardous to risk having so many men flying in a huge circle over Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. One Huey, loaded with lead weights that equaled the weight of the combat-ready Blueboy Group, flew in the Assault Formation during the training missions. The other Huey picked up the eleven-man team at Duke Field, loitered in the vicinity of the initial point, and then switched places with the formation Huey when the flight reached that location. Blueboy's flight time was thus shortened to some twelve to twenty minutes. All men were fresh and sufficiently rested to land in the prison yard mockup and carry on with their assault training.

We wanted to see how Blueboy would perform after just over three hours in the air. This moment of truth did not occur until we flew our first full dress rehearsal on 6 October. Brigadier General Blackburn was our guest that night. He positioned himself somewhere in the camp mockup and awaited the attack. When the raiders landed, they lost precious seconds because they experienced problems with cramped legs and bodies and became justifiably angered over their dispositions. Blackburn got in the way of George Petrie, who ran right over him in the dark and cussed him out with undignified obscenities. This full profile exercise ended our Banana debate. We conceded that only the larger HH-3E could do the job. Only one key question remained: was this behemoth of a helicopter, which was affectionately called the Jolly Green Giant, too big to fit inside the POW camp's courtyard?

Throughout the planning debate, Captain Jacobs and Major Andraitis mulled over numerous photographs, calculating and recalculating the size of the courtyard. They measured and remeasured distances between the walls of buildings and trees and then between the walls and estimated positions of each tree trunk. Could an HH-3E make it in? The HH-3E's rotor blades cut a sixty-two-foot diameter circle compared to the Huey's forty-eight. And the HH-3E's length, at seventy-three feet, was fourteen

feet greater than that of the Huey. There were about sixty feet between the south latrine and the tree trunks by the POW cell buildings and about eighty feet between the west latrine and the tree in front of the large building in the southeast corner of the courtyard. The landing would have to be made on a diagonal heading to ensure sufficient distance for the length of the fuselage. But there was no way to avoid chopping down some tree limbs on the descent to the ground. The HH-3E was much taller than the Huey and would probably avoid hitting the top of the south latrine with its blades if it succeeded in coming down straight and level. The Huey would not have that advantage. There seemed to be very little room to spare, but the photo interpreters concluded that there was enough space to get the larger helicopter into the yard.

Could the Air Force pilots do it? At that point there was no one who would turn down an opportunity to assume the Banana role. Finally, everyone agreed that the HH-3E should be the raid's helicopter. The Blueboy Group could expand to fourteen men without any problems. They could even take along some extra equipment, including a ladder, and still have enough room to stand up, stretch out, and walk around during their long flight. In addition, the HH-3E had two engines to Huey's one. This increased the flight safety factor. Its larger airframe provided additional and more stable firing positions for the Blueboy shooters. There was also one other concern that planners had to consider. What would happen if for some reason the raid got cancelled once it left Laos and entered into North Vietnam? The UH-1H would not have enough fuel to return to Thailand and would have to have a C-130 escort to a Lima Site. The HH-3E had the advantage of hooking up with a tanker if such a mission recall occurred. The HH-3E also had much more power and could fly at faster airspeeds. It did not need as much drafting assistance as the Huey and would not have to fly as close to the C-130, which would make the helicopter formation flight that much safer. At the same time, chances for an en route formation breakup due to degradation of the drafting factor would be lessened.

Consequently, after the first dress rehearsal we used the Hueys with the high intensity floodlights (which simulated moon illumination) to fly over the target area. We grew to admire the airmanship skills and the can-do attitude of the Huey pilots and regretted that their aircraft proved to be too small for the Blueboy assault package. Both Huey crews and one of their helicopters deployed to Udorn so that they could be used as an alternate Banana. This was a hedge for some unforeseen development,

even though we anticipated that there would be two mission-ready HH-3Es waiting for us. The Huey pilots never lost their hope that they would be able to fly the mission. Their helicopter, which arrived in the belly of a C-141, was ready and waiting before launch time. It was Larry Ropka's sad task to inform the still optimistic Lieutenant Williams that the final word was to go with the Air Force's HH-3E.

OBJECTIVE AREA PLANNING

Flight planning for the objective area included pilots from all participating aircraft except the Hueys. First Lieutenant George W. Williams and Chief Warrant Officer Ronald J. Exley participated only in the planning of Eglin training routes. The final planning of routes from Thailand to Son Tay was done with the HH-3E in mind.

We had to observe the president's bombing pause that went into effect over portions of North Vietnam on 31 October 1968. Under this restriction U.S. aircraft could not drop any bombs on North Vietnam north of the 19th parallel. Consequently, our Skyraiders were obligated to limit their bombing and strafing to the small area where their air power was needed to assist and protect our ground forces. The Air Force's MIGCAP and the Navy's coastal diversion fighter activities would be limited to attacking only those targets that engaged them with hostile fire.

The date and time for the raid were very carefully selected to provide optimum conditions for surprise. There would be moonlight illumination. Monitoring of North Vietnamese radio transmissions by Air Force C-135 Combat Apples revealed that enemy radar sites changed shifts regularly at 2:00 A.M.[14] It was also known that other shift changes took place at that hour. So the raid would be executed fifteen to twenty minutes after the 2:00 A.M. prison guard shift change when the rising moon provided about 35 percent illumination. Those lunar conditions would occur between 21 and 25 October and then again between 19 and 23 November. The first window in October was lost because President Nixon's approval for the raid could not be secured in time for the task group to deploy and coordinate the necessary support from various units in Southeast Asia. November became the new target month. We gained more time to train and to polish tactics.

Many years later, some writers and analysts of the Son Tay raid would claim that the raid's timing took advantage of some little known shortcoming of North Vietnamese early warning radars and that we incor-

porated a lapse, or a down time, of their radar coverage to "thread the needle" in order to avoid detection. The truth is that our only fixed times were the traditional shift change of enemy guards and the optimum moon elevation and illumination phases that coincided on the desired October and November time frames. We wanted to arrive at Son Tay between 2:15 and 2:20 A.M., with the exact time dependent on the prevailing in-flight winds. We asked Captain Knops about any known or predictable early warning radar down times that could figure in our route selection and timing. I have no doubt that the intelligence community in Washington addressed that question. However, the three navigator planners (Clark, myself, and Stiles) never received any input on how to "thread the needle." We received excellent input from our radar intelligence source, Lt. Col. Homer Willett. He brought us a map that showed early warning radar coverage that addressed masking behind mountain peaks and ridges in the most vulnerable sector of our formation routes. We used it along with terrain elevations extracted from 1:50,000 scale maps to plan the routes southeast of the Na San radar site. Lieutenant Colonel Kennedy from the Pacific Air Defense Analysis Facility reviewed these routes in Washington. Neither he nor Captain Knops came back to us with information about any enemy radar down times. Finally, before Ben Schemmer submitted the 2002 edition of his book *The Raid* to the publisher, he questioned me at length about the eye of the needle account he described in the original 1976 edition. I told him in some detail how we planned our routes and what intelligence information we used. Then, before I suggested that he delete his threading of the needle story, I questioned Homer Willett, whose Pentagon office should have been included on any such discussions on Vietnamese early warning radar capabilities. He was not aware of any radar-related events that would correspond to the threading of the needle opportunity. So Ben Schemmer altered his text in the 2002 edition of his book.[15]

HELICOPTER ASSAULT FORMATION

Objective area planning included everything that was to take place after the formations passed the initial point at Black River, eleven miles west of the prison camp. Joint decisions were made on where the helicopter formation would break up and how each aircraft would carry out its specific task. It was necessary for all aircraft to have specifically assigned

airspeeds and altitudes in order to achieve safe lateral separation between them during maneuvers in the vicinity of the prison.

The Assault Formation was to reach a point 3.5 nautical miles out of the POW camp flying at eight hundred feet and 105 knots. At that point Cherry One was to break radio silence and give the Apples and the Banana magnetic heading to fly the rest of the way. Cherry One would then begin a precisely planned and carefully practiced aerial maneuvering. It would accelerate to 130 knots and climb to fifteen hundred feet for a four-flare drop over the prison. From this altitude the FLIR navigator would have no problem guiding the aircraft right over the prison courtyard. Apples Four and Five, flown by Lt. Col. Royal C. Brown and Maj. Kenneth D. Murphy, were to follow Cherry One as backup flare ships. They would make flare drops over the compound if Cherry One's flares did not light up. With this done, Apples Four and Five would reverse course, drop down to treetop level, and fly to their landing and engine-running holding positions on an island in the "Finger Lake" seven miles west of Son Tay.

Assault helicopters would proceed to the POW camp unescorted. They

Daytime partial Assault Formation led by MC-130E(I) (Cherry One) with HH-3E (Banana) and two HH-53s (Apples). (USAF photo)

would slow down and position themselves in a new in-trail formation behind the Apple Three gunship. They would descend to a convenient lower altitude and fly the heading broadcasted by Cherry One. Specific airspeeds assigned to the C-130 and each helicopter would ensure proper arrival time separation at the flare-illuminated camp. Flares over the camp would help the helicopters to make final course corrections should they drift left or right of their intended track.

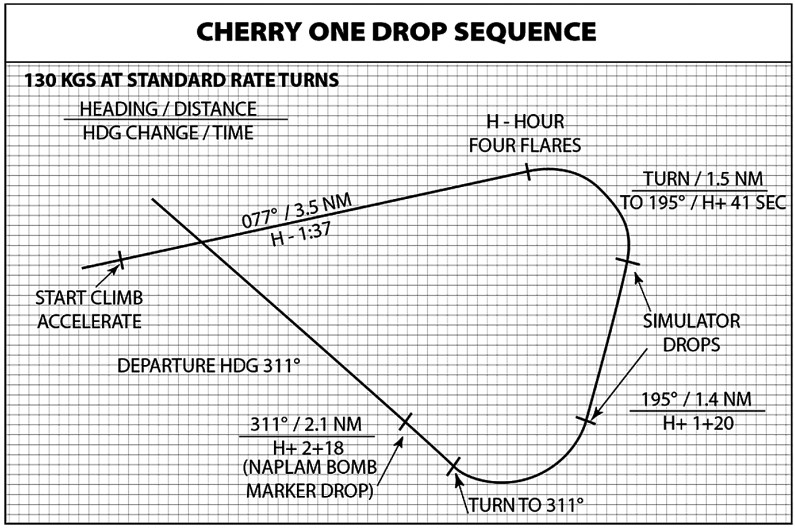
The copilot of Cherry One was to make the radio call "Alpha, Alpha, Alpha" at the moment of flare release. That call would establish the raid's H-hour. We tried several different flare drop sequences. The final one was established in a joint planning meeting with Simons, Sydnor, and Meadows. The three-foot-long, two-million candlepower Mark 24 flares weighed twenty-seven pounds each. Our loadmasters would have to arm them and throw them out of the aircraft. They would provide up to three minutes of intense illumination. Since the C-130 would have only one pass over the objective area, some of the battle simulators and flares would have to be dropped while the aircraft was in a turn. This was because their desired impact points were spaced too close together and were not in a straight line. For that reason, shallow precision turns had to be established with drops executed at precisely timed intervals. Napalm bomb markers had to be dropped with wings level in a straight-line flight. We plotted these turns on graph paper by connecting all desired impact points with combinations of straight lines and arcs corresponding to the precision turns of a Combat Talon. These were plotted and replotted and flight tested repeatedly until we agreed upon the final aircraft track pattern and timing intervals that were measured in seconds.

Immediately after the flare drop, Cherry One was to execute its carefully practiced and timed 15-degree banking right-hand turn that would cause it to fly over Son Tay City to a major road intersection just south of the town. Here, at H-hour plus forty-one seconds it would drop its first battle simulator. This was a specially rigged pyrotechnic container of firecrackers and an assortment of explosives designed to simulate a small arms battle. From that point it would fly on a heading of 195 degrees to a point over a bridge on the Song Con River. There, at H-hour plus one minute, twenty seconds, it would drop the second battle simulator. Next, Cherry One would resume a shallow right-hand turn to a heading of 311 degrees that would cause it to fly between a SAM site and an ammunition storage area. Then, at H-hour plus two minutes, eighteen seconds, it would drop the BLU-27/B napalm bomb markers that would billow bright

forty-foot candle-like flames to confuse the enemy and mark an orbit point for the A-1E Peaches. These fighters would have just arrived in the airspace above at three thousand feet. Continuing on the same heading Cherry One would drop several railroad log flares to produce bright red fires in the vicinity of known military installations. Shortly after crossing its original inbound track to Son Tay, Cherry One would turn west toward a designated holding area over Laos. From there it would provide directional assistance to returning "Fruit Salad" aircraft.

Apple Three, flown by Maj. Marty Donohue, would be the gunship. Its assigned role was to lead the Banana and Apples One and Two to the prison. It was to slow down to 90 knots and descend to a convenient altitude from which its gunners could neutralize the prison guard towers and guard barracks outside the compound walls. With this done, Marty was to fly northwest and find a convenient landing and engine-running holding spots for him and for Apples One and Two. Apple Three would wait there for a call to pick up those raiders and POWs who could not be transported by Apples One and Two.

Maj. Herbert D. Kalen would fly the HH-3E (Banana) with the Blueboy



This graph sketch shows the airdrop maneuver for Cherry One. There was no way to locate targets on the Eglin range that would correspond to the ones in the Son Tay area. Consequently, this airdrop maneuver had to be practiced with precision turns and down-to-the-second timing in order for the drops to occur over desired points on the ground. (Sketch by John Gargus)

Assault Group commanded by Captain Meadows. He was to slow down to 80 knots and follow Apple Three to the prison. The 10-knot difference in airspeed would give Donohue's gunship enough time to clear the prison complex before Banana landed in the tight courtyard. During the landing, selected Blueboy gunners would fire at the guard towers again and take down any guards seen inside the courtyard. Banana's three-man crew would exit from the courtyard on foot with rescued prisoners. The HH-3E was making a one-way trip. It was going to be blown up once the Special Forces departed from the area.

HH-53 (Apple One) was assigned to Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton. He was to slow down to 80 knots and follow Kalen's Banana. His helicopter would carry the Greenleaf Support Group led by Capt. Udo Walther. Apple One's machine gunners were to attack assigned buildings before landing just south of the Son Tay compound. After offloading its troops, Apple One was to take off and retreat to a holding area selected and marked by Donohue's Apple Three.

Apple Two belonged to Lt. Col. John V. Allison. He was to follow behind Apple One and deliver Capt. Dan Turner's Redwine Command Group with ground forces commander Lt. Col. Bud Sydnor to the south wall of the prison. Once his helicopter was empty, he was to join Britton and Donohue in their holding area and await a call to return for a pick-up of rescued POWs and the Redwine Group.

I distinctly remember one occasion when I had an opportunity to discuss our air operations tactics with Bull Simons. I did not attach much significance to our one-on-one encounter at that time, but one raid event later made that conversation stand out. Bull was seeking assurances that Cherry One would not mistake one installation that was four hundred meters south of the POW camp for the real target. This installation was of the same size as the prison and had almost the same geometric orientation. It had a road leading to it that paralleled the Song Con River. Aerial photography did not show it having any of the air raid shelter trenches or antiaircraft gun positions that were clearly visible around the Son Tay camp. Our Marine Corps intelligence expert on North Vietnamese ground forces, Lt. Jim Brinson, did not have this location circled in green, which was his method of marking locations that housed military units. For some unknown reason we referred to this location as the "Secondary School."

I explained to Bull that Cherry One would have no problem flying very close to the planned track because there were many checkpoints available once we got into the Red River Valley. The navigator at the infrared moni-

tor would be able to see the river and the road approach to the camp. He would have no problem distinguishing the two from fifteen hundred feet. The river would be at least three to four times as wide as the blacktop road. Both would show clearly on his indicator, as well as the two similar installations ahead. All the crew had to do was to fly to the camp on the left, which would be on the right bank of the river. Dropping the flares right over the camp would be an easy task.

That answer appeared to satisfy Colonel Simons, but he needed assurances about the helicopters that would have to arrive at the right camp without the C-130 escort. I conceded to him that their task of navigating to the correct camp would be more difficult. They would be flying much lower, at approximately two hundred feet above the highest local terrain elevation, and they would not have a very large panoramic view of the area. Trees would be whizzing by, but as long as they remained between the river and the road, they would be very close to the correct inbound track. The C-130 acceleration and helicopter slow-down would ensure good distance separation so that the pilots could see the illumination of the flares before they spotted either one of the camps. Banana would fly higher and at some distance from the lead gunship. Flying at a higher altitude, Banana and the other Apples would be able to see the upper rotor blade lights against the dark terrain below. I did not have the exact distance figures for Simons at that time, but I calculated them for him and for my planning colleagues soon thereafter. During the last 3.5 miles of flight Cherry One would gain thirty-five seconds, or 1,770 yards on Apple Three. Banana would be an additional seventeen seconds, or 770 yards farther behind, followed by Apple One and Apple Two. So the gunship would be some seventeen football field lengths away when the first flare illuminated the Son Tay POW camp.

Bull Simons had a lot of experience with night flare drops from aircraft, and he related to me how trees would cast rapidly lengthening shadows as the flares descended toward the ground. How would the shadows affect the helicopter pilots? No problem! Aim the aircraft at the light that caused the shadows. I also added that if the pilots paid attention to the shadows, they would probably note that the tree shadows were getting shorter because of the speed at which they would be approaching the subpoint of the flares. He admitted that he had not experienced anything like that before. His observations had always been from the ground to which the shadow-casting trees were rooted.

I also recall that this was the time he learned about my background.

I brought up the subject of who named the other camp the Secondary School. In my opinion, that was no school. Only someone who grew up in America would identify a building complex well outside a town as a school. In Europe the schools are situated inside population centers and children walk to them. Only in America do we build schools on the outskirts of expanding communities and then bus our children to them. He agreed with that and then showed genuine interest in how I became an American citizen after having grown up in Czechoslovakia.

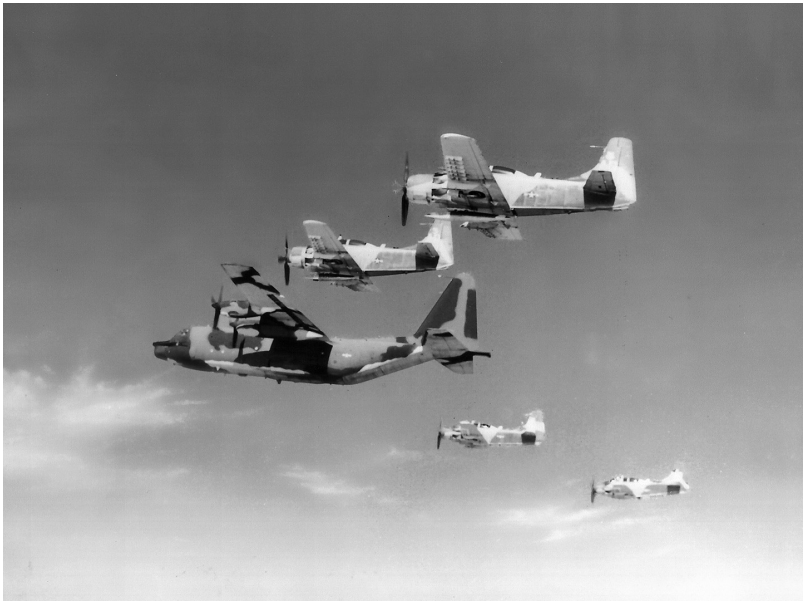
Bull seemed completely satisfied with my assurances about the helicopter navigation during the last minutes of flight. The subject did not come up between us until more than seven years later when we were both lecturing on the Son Tay raid at the Special Operations School at Hurlburt Field. That presentation on the Son Tay raid became a part of that school's curriculum. Col. Dick Dutton, former Son Tay inmate, was the school's commandant, and he would always bring in Simons, who was raising hogs on his not-so-distant retirement farm in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. He would invite me to present the air operations side of the raid whenever the raid's helicopter pilots from Eglin were not available. I became a convenient alternate who was always there because I was based at Hurlburt. Bull recalled my reassuring comments about the Secondary School during every presentation we made together.

FIGHTER STRIKE FORMATION

We scheduled Cherry Two's Strike Formation to reach the common initial point (IP) two minutes behind Cherry One. This time separation would ensure that Cherry One had both track and altitude separation from Cherry Two and its entourage of A-1E fighters. Cherry One's shallow right-hand turn over Son Tay City would place it below and south of the inbound track of A-1E Peaches One and Two, which would be flying toward the illumination flares over the prison at their dive-bombing altitude of three thousand feet. All HH-53 Apples would be either on the ground or moving west to their holding areas at treetop level. Cherry Two would drop off its formation at three thousand feet at the initial point on the Black River. From there it would descend to fifteen hundred feet and proceed to within four miles of Son Tay. At that point it would turn right to a reciprocal heading back to the IP. En route it would drop two battle simulators in the vicinity of major roads, followed by two BLU-27/B napalm bomb markers, and finally some railroad flares. Each drop would be close to a suspected

military installation identified by Lt. Jim Brinson. After crossing the Black River, Cherry Two would loiter in one of two pre-planned orbits outside of known AAA range but well within Son Tay's line of sight. Cherry Two's crew was to monitor and record all radio transmissions of raid participants and be on standby with the Fulton Recovery System equipment in case someone got shot down and required rescue that could not be provided by the helicopters. We kept in mind that the primary reason for the helicopters was to bring home the prisoners. Helicopters with freed prisoners would not be committed to a rescue effort that would delay or jeopardize their expeditious exit from Vietnam. Cherry Two would remain in its holding orbit until all mission aircraft crossed into the mountains on their way to Laos. With all aircraft safely out of the area, Cherry Two would leapfrog to the Skyline TACAN in Laos and establish another orbit in which to monitor the passage of returning Apples and Peaches.

The first two A-1Es, Peach One and Peach Two, piloted by Maj. Edwin J. "Jerry" Rhein Jr. and Maj. James R. Gochnauer, were to continue to the flare-illuminated Son Tay compound and establish a holding orbit at the point marked by Cherry One's napalm firebombs. From this orbit they



Daytime photo of the Strike Formation with four A-1E Peaches and their Combat Talon lead Cherry Two. (USAF photo)

would observe and interdict any enemy troop movements and respond to requests from the Special Forces forward air guides. Peaches Three and Four, which were assigned to Majs. Richard S. Skeels and Eustace M. Bunn, would establish their holding orbit over the western napalm firebomb markers (Cherry Two's). They were to be ready to switch places with Peaches One and Two whenever instructed by their leader, Jerry Rhein. They anticipated switching positions before they depleted half of their ordnance. One aircraft of each pair and the airborne spare would be equipped with a very high frequency (VHF) jammer to disrupt voice communications between MIG interceptors and their ground controllers. Maj. John C. Squires was to fly in the spare Peach Five. He would hold west of the Black River, outside of the AAA threat, and replace any Peach that might get shot down, become damaged, or run out of ordnance.

USAF Major Command Contributions

Several Air Force major commands had to be involved to support Manor's Joint Contingency Task Group in its training, deployment to Southeast Asia, and the eventual raid execution. The Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. John D. Ryan, assisted him in obtaining the necessary no-questions-asked cooperation. He gave Manor a very special letter that introduced him as the commander of a Joint Contingency Task Group that was operating directly under the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Commanders who were presented this letter were obliged to provide Manor with all assistance he requested. If for some reason they could not comply, they would have to address their reasons for not doing so directly to him—General Ryan.

We relied heavily on the Military Airlift Command, which had to provide aircraft for deployment to Southeast Asia, assault formation helicopters and tankers, and air rescue, along with weather-forecasting services. For that reason Brigadier General Manor made an early personal contact with Gen. Jack J. Catton at Scott AFB, Illinois, who promised him full support for the Ivory Coast project.[16] An experienced loadmaster from Dover AFB, Delaware, came to Eglin to size up the equipment and personnel loads we wanted airlifted to Takhli RTAFB and then returned home. Maj. Dick Peshkin visited Scott AFB, where he completed the necessary load manifests for four C-141s and arranged for their time-phased arrival at Takhli. He also arranged for two C-141 medical evacuation aircraft to stand by at Clark AFB in the Philippines. They would fly to Udorn RTAFB to pick up the rescued POWs.

Manor also met with his immediate boss, Gen. William W. Momyer, commander of the Tactical Airlift Command at Langley AFB, Virginia, to brief him on the mission he had received from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He listed the support he needed from his command: a Combat Talon C-130 from Pope AFB, A1-E Skyraiders from Hurlburt Field, and theater shuttle transport C-130s based in Southeast Asia that the raiders would need in Thailand. The Air Force Systems Command had to contribute experimental and training ranges at Eglin AFB. The Air Defense Command had to furnish two EC-121 radar platforms to provide coverage for our aircraft in the Son Tay area. Finally, the Air Force Logistics Command had to provide special equipment and technicians to modify some aircraft.

EC-121 COLLEGE EYE

We needed the capability of College Eye radar platforms to monitor our low-level aircraft in the Son Tay area. Using their identification friend or foe equipment (IFF), the EC-121s could distinguish our aircraft from airborne MIGs. They would provide MIG warnings and direct MIGCAP F-4s to intercept them. The Navy had smaller E-1B airborne platforms and used the more advanced Naval Tactical Data System (NTDS), which furnished tactical data in real time to properly equipped ships in the Gulf of Tonkin and to the Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain. Lt. Col. Homer Willett's office in the Pentagon managed the Southeast Asia Operational Requirement 62 (SEAOR 62), whose objective was to modify the EC-121s to give them the same type of direct encrypted data link download that the Navy already possessed with NTDS. This modification would upgrade the capability of EC-121s from data processing that depended on grease pencil plotting of aircraft movements to a direct data link download from airborne radars to the command post monitoring screens. It would give the control center real-time depiction of what was happening in the air within the range of monitoring airborne radars. Homer's biggest problem was that the newly modified EC-121Ts were not yet operationally ready. They were still undergoing equipment installation and testing in Texas.

Because we did not coordinate with College Eye officials during our planning and training, we did not know about the planned modification of the existing EC-121D models into "T" models. This modification process was in full swing during the summer of 1970, but the system would not be ready in time for the initially contemplated October mission. This

might have been at least one of the reasons why Homer did not disclose this development to our planning level. When the rescue mission got delayed until November, Homer seized the opportunity to employ the newly modified but not yet operationally tested T models in the raid's support. He visited the Air Defense Command headquarters in Colorado and arranged to have two newly modified EC-121T "Connies" deployed to Thailand under the pretext that they would go to Korat to perform new equipment testing in areas where the new electronic equipment would eventually be employed. This made good practical sense, and all who were involved in the modification project accepted that cover story.

The 552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing at McClellan AFB, California, provided the EC-121s employed in Southeast Asia. Its commander, Col. Henry L. Timmermans, received word on 29 October 1970 to generate two EC-121T aircraft with crews for deployment to Korat to conduct new equipment operational tests. He designated Lt. Col. John B. "Jake" Mulherron as the project officer for this unexpected Southeast Asia test cycle.[17] In turn, Jake picked the most knowledgeable and available individuals in operations, communications, maintenance, and radar who had participated in prior Category I and Category II testing of this new modification. They became his principal advisors in their respective specialties. They were Capt. Herbert M. Bomhoff, weapons controller from the College Eye Task Force staff, who was already with the detachment at Korat; Capt. Bobby G. Edney, weapons controller and operations; CMSgt. Forrest G. Wright, radar technician and avionics; S. M. Sgt. Darrel R. Crossman, radio operator and communications; and M. Sgt Jimmie A. Chevrier, radar crew chief and operations. These key individuals inherited the formidable task of preparing two EC-121Ts with an additional spare and all necessary support and test equipment for deployment to Korat on very short notice. On 31 October, with their preparations already well under way, Homer Willett showed up to give them an encouraging pat on the back and tell them that they needed to deploy on 3 November.[18] Homer did not tell Timmermans the real purpose for the hurried deployment of his wing's talented personnel and aircraft. But he did inform Jake Mulherron about the POW rescue mission that would await the crews at the end of their unexpected deployment to Thailand.

Shortly thereafter Jake Mulherron held a meeting with key people, including aircraft commanders, and informed them that after the completion of testing in Thailand they would fly one operational mission before returning home. He insisted that all crew members be volunteers for this

deployment and gave all of those he already picked for his advisory staff an option to get out of that commitment. No one chose to do so. After that meeting Jake chose to brief two of his senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), Chevrier and Crossman, about the planned POW rescue. He felt that because these two individuals would be in charge of the pre- and post-deployment preparatory work, they needed to know why it was so important to have the two EC-121Ts in full operational readiness in the shortest possible time. He did not want anyone to assume that this would be just a normal shakedown testing of their new equipment.

Deployment of Jake and his men came at a time when the wing was straining to meet its normal Air Defense Command commitments. One EC-121T had already been to Korat on a thirty-day test mission in August and the other T models were undergoing Category II tests with the 552nd Wing's crews off the coast of California. Earlier during the summer selected crew members participated in twelve Category I test flights with the contractor, Ling-Temco-Vought Electro Systems, in Greenville, Texas. Now two EC-121Ts and a cargo C-121G with fifty-two crew members and the most experienced technicians would have to depart on another long temporary duty to Southeast Asia.

The unexpected deployment and its hurried preparation was not a joyride. The SEAOR-62 equipment was new and still in its testing stages. It had not yet been formally accepted by the Air Force. Consequently, supply channels for it did not exist. This meant that to conduct the tests in Thailand, technicians had to bring everything with them. At Korat they could count only on maintenance support that already existed for the D models. Because the two T models were not large enough to transport all the people and equipment needed for the tests, the technicians had to add a cargo C-121 to their deployment package.

In addition, the new digital data receiver ground terminal with its support spares and radio relay equipment needed for the testing in Thailand had to be deployed immediately by a separate military airlift without communicating with the detachment at Korat about its arrival or its purpose. That would be something Homer Willett would have to handle upon his arrival in Thailand. To complicate things even more, Category II tests identified the need for three major wiring modifications to accommodate the new onboard equipment. This wiring modification had to be delayed until the two EC-121Ts arrived at Korat.[19]

Departure of the test unit from McClellan was on time even though one EC-121T had to be switched for a well-prepared and checked-out

standby spare. Equally prudent was the decision to fly all three aircraft together because the crew members and spares from the cargo ship provided valuable assistance along the way and ensured the group's on-time arrival at Korat on 12 November.

College Eye's role in the Son Tay raid turned out to be a story of deception that was craftily engineered by Homer Willett. Personnel of the 552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing from McClellan AFB were not aware of the role some of their colleagues played in the POW rescue effort because those who took part in it believed that they had not been cleared to talk about it. I was amazed a full thirty years later when I located retired C. M. Sgt. Forrest Wright to solicit his input on his participation in the raid. He informed me that his buddies in the College Eye community still did not know about their 1970 involvement in the raid. I agreed to write an article on the College Eye participation in the Son Tay raid for the 551st and 552nd Wings' combined reunion in Oklahoma City in 2001. Wright shared its text with one die-hard skeptic, who at the time of the raid served as the wing's operations officer. This officer kept insisting that there was no connection between his wing and the raid; he did not believe that his people could have participated in the raid without his knowledge.[20] He must have missed a brief comment that the wing historian, who had no details on the raid, made in his unit's historical report that crews who deployed to Thailand with the new T models flew in support of the Son Tay raid. So Homer Willett's version of the event survived at least in that officer's recollection of the events of 1970.

In his Directorate of Operations office in the Pentagon, Homer Willett served as project officer for the implementation of the Integrated Tactical Air Control System in Southeast Asia. This system integrated tactical display data with real-time inputs from translators who monitored enemy defense communications. It gave our commanders not only a visual display of what was happening in the air but also what instructions were being passed on to the enemy defenders.[21]

Supporting Aircraft and Mission Command Plans

We were aware that our training and planning was confined to two formations that consisted of only thirteen aircraft and that many more would be added in the war zone to support the effort. We planned for a MIG trap

and for the diversion to be staged by the Navy without fully realizing just how many aircraft the final operation would require. From past combat experiences we knew that the mission could not be undertaken without the involvement of several agencies that monitored and assisted wartime air operations on a routine basis. We knew about the ever-present C-135 Combat Apple that monitored and coordinated air operations within the enemy airspace from its orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin. There was also one C-130 Airborne Command Communications and Control aircraft that normally flew over Laos and the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Super Jolly Green Giants and Sandys that brought home downed crews. We would need support from several area radar ground control intercept sites and the Air Force's Tactical Air Control Center–North Sector at Monkey Mountain in Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam. This control center would be used as Brigadier General Manor's command post for our invasion of North Vietnam. Other arrangements would have to be made with each organization responsible for our support without compromising mission security. More immediate members of Manor's planning staff would have to make these sensitive contacts once we were ready to deploy to our staging base at Takhli.

CINCPAC's Role in the Plan

Adm. John S. McCain Jr., Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), whose Navy pilot son had been a POW for almost three years, was in Washington on 25 September 1970. Blackburn and Manor used this opportunity to brief him on their rescue plan. McCain suspected that his injured son was not at Son Tay but in some other prison in downtown Hanoi. He believed that the POW rescue would work and gave the plan his enthusiastic support. He insisted on maximum security within his command and promised Blackburn that only one other person in his headquarters, his own chief of staff, Army Lt. Gen. Charles A. Corcoran, would be read in on the plan. Manor would have to work directly with the commander of Task Force 77 in the Gulf of Tonkin to coordinate the Navy's participation. This commitment was kept. Information about the POW rescue was not made available to the CINCPAC staff that was running the war in Vietnam.[22]

Medical Planning

As the flight planning in Manor's conference room progressed, we began to see more and more of Lt. Col. Joseph R. "Doc" Cataldo and became aware of the extensive medical planning he was doing for the POW rescue. Cataldo acquired the sole use of one of the four drawers of our TOP SECRET filing safe and seemed to work very diligently on all kinds of papers and medical documents. We seldom interrupted his work while he busied himself at his end of the huge conference room table, but we could not say the same thing about him. He was definitely the chattiest and the most colorful personality of our whole group. He could start a bull session on just about any topic that came into his head at any moment. Once he got started, we would, one after another, set aside whatever we were doing and listen to his spin on the way he thought things ought to be. In the process we learned more than we cared to know about Korean POWs' diet, weight losses, muscular degeneration, vitamin deficiencies, dozens of diseases, and difficulties with post-captivity adjustment to normal foods. He had medical statistics on all of that, and we had to agree that he was indeed an excellent planner who left nothing to chance. Rescued POWs would be provided with every conceivable immediate need, from comfortable slippers and blankets to easily digestible food for their first meals in freedom. He admitted that he had access to and had studied the medical histories of numerous known and suspected Vietnam POWs. Some of us even suspected that he had in his safe a list of POWs we expected to free from Son Tay. Most of us did not learn the truth about this list until after the raid. During our work in the conference room we respected his private TOP SECRET drawer even though we knew that it was the place where he would store his personal copy of *Playboy* magazine, which was always available on his side of the huge table when he was present. He was an avid *Playboy* reader and managed to get early copies somewhere before they became available to the rest of us in the Base Exchange.

Target Area Threats

Enemy air defenses in the Son Tay area were among the world's most formidable. Weekly intelligence reports of that time period revealed that

the North Vietnamese moved their interceptors from one base to another. A review of their November 1970 posture shows that Phuc Yen Air Base, which was east-northeast and only seventeen miles out of Son Tay, had more than seventy MIG 21s. Gia Lam Air Base with some thirty MIG 15s and 17s was east-southeast at twenty-four miles. Yen Bai Air Base, with a total of fifty MIG 15s, 17s, 19s, and 21s, was fifty miles west-northwest.[23] Hoa Loc Air Base was only six miles south of Son Tay. It was the home base for transport aircraft and did not have any permanently assigned interceptors on it. The whole Hanoi area was ringed with surface-to-air missile sites that were heavily defended by a variety of antiaircraft artillery. Eight of the sites were on the west side in the vicinity of Son Tay.

Our objective was in the middle of thousands of troops who, once alerted, could challenge our small fifty-six-man invading force and helicopters that would idle on the ground in the vicinity of the camp. North Vietnamese missile men and gunners were well trained by their Soviet allies and had several years of experience defending their airspace. The number of American airmen in captivity was a clear indication of their competence. Their potential for defense against us as ground invaders was equally challenging. We had various estimates of the number of ground troops that were present in the area during different periods of the war. These varied from as few as twelve thousand to as many as eighty thousand, all in places within easy reach of Son Tay. This was their training area for soldiers who would go to fight in the south and for those who remained at home for local antiaircraft defense. They had schools for everything from basic training to sophisticated sapper operations. Their early warning and SAM control radar training was only three miles south of the Son Tay prison compound and so was their SAM launch training site. There was nighttime training for truck drivers who hauled supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail as well as nighttime infiltration and combat training. Our 1:50,000 scale chart of the area was full of green squares, rectangles, and circles annotated by Jim Brinson. They outlined buildings and complexes housing various known military units.

We pressured Jack Knops for details on North Vietnam's air defenses that went beyond the numbers and locations of their aircraft that he readily provided for us. He impressed us with his vast knowledge of the enemy's defense posture by relating many trivial bits of intelligence that had no bearing on our mission planning, but we were interested in their actual nighttime capability to launch MIG 21 interceptors. Where would they come from and how many would be in alert status on the night

of the raid? He disappointed us by saying that we did not yet have the need to know such information. Why weren't we as planners privileged to such essential information that he already possessed? He replied that the mission had not yet been approved by President Nixon and that he might not approve it at all. If the president did give his approval and the mission was sure to take place, he would provide us with all the information we needed to fly the mission. Wow! That was a big blow to our morale. We never considered that the president would waver in letting us conduct the POW rescue. What kind of man would not? Reluctantly we had to admit that Jack was correct, but we disliked him for that and for the way he reminded us of what we should have known. It always seemed that he was deciding what we should and should not know. He was the Pentagon's most frequent visitor, bringing fresh intelligence to Brigadier General Manor and to us planners. Once when there was a long period of time when he did not show up at Eglin, someone suggested that perhaps he had gone to Vietnam to get personally updated on the latest intelligence. When he showed up again, he let us know that we had no need to know where he had been. We were not the only clients he had. He had other irons in the fire.

Confident Assessment

In spite of this impressive potential threat in the Son Tay area, careful assessment of the enemy's capabilities and our own experience had us convinced that we would succeed in carrying out the daring mission. We could lose either one of the Combat Talons. We needed only one for a successful helicopter escort. Army Special Forces had backup plans in the event that any one of the three helicopters transporting the raiders was lost. We believed that we would be well on our way out by the time the North Vietnamese could muster effective ground opposition to the short intrusion. Confusion generated by the MIG trap scenario should ensure that our low-level invasion force would reach Son Tay undetected. Once there, the same fighters would protect the ground forces and helicopters from attacks by enemy MIGs. Cherry One would be over the mountains and Cherry Two would be in its orbit west of the Black River, safe from SAMs and AAA, well before enemy air defenses could become fully active. Our F-4s and F-105s, which would be used as bait to draw the attention of SAMs, would face the greatest risks. We antici-

pated numerous missile launchings and intensive AAA directed at them. Firebomb markers that Cherry One had to deliver would fall within half a mile of an active missile site that was well protected by AAA. Peaches would have to orbit in this vicinity. Their low altitude would not make them good missile targets, but they would be subjected to considerable AAA and small arms fire. A-1E pilots would have to be at their very best throughout their time over the Son Tay area.

The plan was for our fifty-six-man ground force to profit from the element of surprise. The three assault groups, Blueboy, Greenleaf, and Redwine, were superbly trained and armed with awesome firepower that would quickly eliminate any guards that had just awakened. The firefight simulators, napalm bomb markers, and log flares dropped by both Cherries would create area-wide confusion, causing various units to report and to respond to firefights that would not be there. All this would increase the enemy's response time. It would take their leaders a while to piece together what was actually taking place, and we would be gone by the time they could mount any organized opposition. Our Green Berets needed less than thirty minutes to complete their work. We often debated among ourselves about how many armed and ready for combat enemy troops would be available at 2:30 in the morning. We did not think that in their training environment there would be too many soldiers sleeping with weapons at their sides. Most likely their weapons would have to be issued to them from a secure storage location. We had ourselves convinced that only the nighttime guards would be under arms and that their first duty would be to defend their immediate turf and report any evidence of distant action to higher authorities. These reports would soon saturate their commanders with numerous area-wide firefight outbreaks.

Final Preparations in Florida

We finalized our flight plans for the Strike and Assault Formations before deploying to Takhli. All Combat Talon C-130 officers received a briefing on the raid's objective several days before our departure so that they could join the mission planners in the conference room to study the routes and prepare their own mission charts. It was gratifying to see the enthusiasm with which the newly initiated pilots and navigators attacked their mission preparation work. Their days of flying memorized training routes were over. Now the charts and documents they were preparing

were for the real thing. Eleven members of their former 15th Air Commando Squadron from Nha Trang had been missing in action over North Vietnam since Christmas of 1967. Hopes were kindled that some of them could be alive and held as POWs at Son Tay.

Our Combat Talon group was self-sufficient and required minimal outside airlift assistance for deployment to Thailand. Both C-130s airlifted all their maintenance personnel, security police, and full mobility maintenance kits. Security police personnel were needed to guard the Talons while these were parked on en route stops to deny aircraft access to unauthorized individuals. Major Peshkin remained at Eglin until all of the raider resources departed on airlift aircraft that he had previously arranged for and obtained from the Military Airlift Command. He made sure that all loads were dispatched as planned and that nothing was left behind.

Security Challenges

Security that was practiced by all participants was excellent. Each individual deserves credit for his contribution to this common effort. The compliment applies not only to the very few who were read in on the intent of our mission and who worked on the fine-tuning of plans for the Southeast Asia participating units but also to those who were kept in the dark until the time came for their inclusion on the whole plan. It was awkward to work and live together for days and weeks with colleagues who were aware that only some of us knew what our end mission would be. However, those who were kept in the dark proved to be good soldiers and did not trouble the initiated few with probing questions. Maj. Tom Mosley and Capts. Tom Eckhart and Bill Guenon from the 7th SOS vividly expressed the frustration of this majority group when they designed the clever and now well known shoulder patch with the acronym KITD/FOH. This humorous patch shows a mushroom in a dark smelly atmosphere with two eyeballs peering from under it. The acronym stands for "kept in the dark / fed on horse s***."

Maintenance of tight security was not a small matter when one scrutinizes the environments in which many pre-raid activities took place. Consider that more than three hundred Special Forces hopefuls responded to Bull Simons's call to volunteer for a special project. Knowing the reputation of this man, all suspected that something very challenging was at hand. Almost one hundred of those who were selected promptly disap-

peared from Fort Bragg. Many of them were known to have orders to other Special Forces assignments that had to be cancelled for this unexpected Bull Simons project. Dick Meadows and Bud Sydnor, both equally reputable within the ranks for successful and gutsy combat operations, disappeared from Fort Benning. There must have been many questions and speculations about what was going on. It is logical to assume that during their intensive training many men would conclude that they were preparing for the rescue of a large number of people, but they were not supposed to find out that these people were POWs in North Vietnam until they were ready to depart on the raid from Takhli. That the Special Forces leaders were able to conceal the target location from such a large number of individuals is rather remarkable.

There was much speculation going on in the home units of Combat Talon participants. Detachment 2, 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) at Pope, provided one crew with a complement of maintenance and Security Police personnel that totaled thirty-three men. The 7th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) from Ramstein in Germany contributed a crew at the most inopportune time—during its annual deployment to England for a multinational Flintlock exercise. Even the 15th SOS at Nha Trang in South Vietnam must have had questions about why one of its aircraft, which was sent for modification to Lockheed Air Service in California, was not being returned to wartime duty. There were plenty of questions that participants could not provide answers for without jeopardizing mission security.

Much the same can be said about other participating aircrews. Most of the HH-53 crew members were flying from their home base at Eglin. They were conducting frequent night flights with mixed crews whose pilots and other crew members were on temporary duty to Eglin from wartime units in Southeast Asia. That was an odd situation. The same was true at Hurlburt Field, where tight-lipped A-1E pilots were flying night missions with copilots from Nakhom Phanom RTAFB. What kind of new night tactics were being tested? We flew our early experimental formation flights during daytime either over the Gulf of Mexico or over the vast, unpopulated Eglin AFB forests well out of sight for local inhabitants. Our night flights were blacked out and practically impossible to see from the ground.

All of us in the planning group had friends in Eglin area. It was difficult for us to avoid bumping into them and answering questions such as "What are you doing here?" or "Are you still here?" and "Are you back

again?" Those of us who had been read in on the mission had a good motivation to offer a credible story, but others, notably the people from Germany, had it tougher. Our friends thought we were in Florida on some kind of a boondoggle drawing good per diem.

Our counterintelligence guys, "Blue Max" Newman and Dick Beyea, had their plates full trying to monitor everything we did at work and during our ample leisure time. They were with us during every Monday night football game (which we watched on color television) when a large group of us gathered at Bull Simons's bachelor officer quarters to gorge ourselves on boiled shrimp and beer. They wanted to make sure that none of the forbidden mission information came up when our tongues loosened up in the presence of our uninitiated crew member colleagues. Both are still reluctant to speak about the way they handled their assignments. All who ever served in a military environment will understand this reluctance to discuss their involvement. As a joint military operation the raid may be an open book when detailing "what" we did. However, "how" our counterintelligence supporters conducted their affairs may be classified to the present day.

We will never know just how many potential mission compromises were averted because of the shadowy work of these agents. That is always typical in their operation. They never toot their horns and often they never even learn when they scored a successful hit. It is not possible to reward someone responsible for avoiding an adverse event that could have but did not occur. There must have been some close calls that went unnoticed by all of us. Manor received daily briefings from officials who were monitoring our telephones in Florida. They were not aware of what our mission was, and their job was to find out what they could put together from all the communications they were hearing. They were not able to gather any significant clues suggesting that we were training for a rescue mission or that we would be deploying our training force somewhere to carry it out.

Suspected Security Leaks?

When Ben Schemmer published his book on the raid in 1976, we learned that things did not go so smoothly in Washington. One of the original officers whom Brigadier General Blackburn had brought in for the planning phase did not pay close enough attention to the security guidelines that governed the whole group. His loose tongue brought him to the at-

tention of counterintelligence agents, who took proper care of him. He was debriefed and monitored until the raid was over.[24] His name does not appear on any documents listing the planners.

Ben Schemmer revealed another interesting suspected security leak that involved the top man of the entire operation, Brigadier General Blackburn. He did not elaborate on many details, but the chief planner in Washington, Colonel Frisbie, was more blunt about this incident in his memoirs:

> We had set up a small group of intelligence specialists and tapped every one of our telephones. They had someone listening in all the time. One time Gen. Blackburn was reading Gen. Manor's briefing schedule over an insecure phone indicating when he would brief Admiral McCain in Hawaii and also when Manor would brief the Generals in South Vietnam and when he would brief the Navy Admirals on the Carrier Force.
>
> One Sunday morning Gen. Manor received a written report from the guys monitoring all our phones that THEY HAD DISCOVERED WHAT WE WERE PLANNING TO DO! . . . Of course all that was assuming that the enemy was tapping our phones. Our Code Name was "Polar Circle." With Blackburn's call telling Manor his schedule for briefing, all those Generals and Admirals in Vietnam area, those guys didn't have much trouble figuring out that we were not going to the Polar Circle!
>
> Blackburn's call to Manor was on the military radio phone network used all over the world. As long as you didn't discuss any classified info, it was OK. Giving a briefing to Generals and Admirals in the Pacific as such wasn't classified, but tying those Generals and Admirals in with our flying helicopters at night would make anyone suspicious.
>
> Gen. Ryan, knowing that the Air Force was the force responsible for the Son Tay Raid, wanted to make sure that it would not fail. So he sent his Director of Operations to us to check us out.
>
> This Director of Operations was Maj. Gen. Carlos M. Talbot. I had known him for years. He asked me, "How's your security?" I told him that our enlisted men were restricted to base and that our little intelligence unit was monitoring our phones. He asked, "Did they discover anything?" I had to confess about Blackburn's phone call. He nodded understanding, but didn't say anything further.

> Later that night we had dinner and I asked him not to relay Blackburn's phone call gaffe. He nodded approval. So he went back to the Pentagon and reported to our Chief, Gen. Ryan.
>
> Talbot could not possibly refuse to tell Gen. Ryan about Blackburn's phone call. It was not right that I asked him not to tell and of course, Gen. Ryan jumped all over the Army and SACSA (Blackburn's JCS staff) about that security leak. I understand that he was ready to resign his commission and other drastic measures.[25]

Colonel Frisbie was also very critical of one of his own security lapses with a general officer who managed the raid's helicopter assets and who at that time was not yet supposed to know what was being planned:

> I happened to run into Brig. Gen. Pete Everest in the Pentagon parking lot. He knew me well and said, "What the hell is going on, Friz?" Pete had been very touchy when he didn't get what he wanted for his outfit. All the helicopters and all the pilots we were using belonged to his organization. I knew he wouldn't take "No" for an answer and would drag his foot on everything we tried to do. Warner Britton, our helicopter pilot on my Study Group and one of our HH-53 pilots on our air attack-airlift effort, said that Pete had asked him what was going on and Warren said, "I can't tell you." That made Pete mad.
>
> So I told him briefly that it was a POW rescue attempt and he was ecstatic. Before we parted, he asked me what was the code name and I told him "Polar Circle."
>
> I didn't think much more about it until about two weeks later. General Allen and I got called into a four star General's office. . . . Evidently Pete Everest had worked for him at one time or another. Well, this four star General received a letter from Pete who asked if he could command the "Polar Circle" operation.
>
> The General's question was, "Who told him?" Well, it was me.
>
> I never got chewed out for my "leak," but I know Gen. Allen was disappointed in me.[26]

Commander's Security

Without a doubt our commander, Brigadier General Manor, faced the most difficult security challenge of all. He was preparing a task force

for an invasion of North Vietnam from his home base at Eglin while at the same time carrying on his normal duties as the commander of the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Forces. Only five people in his office knew what was happening. They provided daily administrative support for his planning and training staff. He had to hide everything from his immediate subordinates. People must have been very suspicious of the unusual goings-on in their headquarters. They knew that someone was using their building, mainly the conference room, at night. There were people, known to many officials from prior assignments, who were just hanging around for too long. There were also important high-ranking officials from the Pentagon who would receive briefings, not from the regular command briefing officers but from those other temporary duty people who seemed to loiter around at the Base Exchange, bowling alley, and cafeterias in civilian clothing during normal daytime duty hours. Their general would be seen frequently in the company of a notorious Army Special Forces colonel and would go with him on trips that they would not be told about. Surely something unusual was going on, but a nighttime training for a joint invasion force of North Vietnam? No one ever dreamed of such a thing. Brigadier General Manor proved to be an amazing actor who deceived everyone—from his wife Dolores and his immediate staff to all others with whom he dealt in his daily tasks. I don't believe that there is a parallel to the deceptive role he played throughout his involvement in the Son Tay raid operation. He deserves great credit for this phase of his overall command role.

] CHAPTER THREE [

Preparations in Southeast Asia

The deployment of our Joint Contingency Task Group to Southeast Asia is perhaps the least known phase of the Son Tay raid. Accounts about the raid focus on the rigorous training and meticulous planning in Florida and omit the way we sneaked into the combat zone and upstaged the regular troops there by pulling off the biggest surprise of the Vietnam War. We planned and trained well, but once ready, we were still halfway around the world from our target. For the raid to be a success, we had to enter the war zone undetected by the enemy and avoid attracting any undue scrutiny from the U.S. forces whose unquestioned assistance we needed. It was challenging to solicit support from several key theater units whose commanders were told that they did not need to know what we intended to do with their resources. Because all normal means of communications for this mission were forbidden, only a few planners coordinated with these unit commanders on a face-to-face basis. In spite of the unprecedented demand on their units' assets, all commanders rose to the occasion and did what was expected of them.

Carrier Availability?

A very curious event occurred just before Brigadier Generals Blackburn and Manor departed for Vietnam with Colonel Simons to present the POW rescue plan to the key leaders in the field. Blackburn discovered what he believed to be a significant glitch in the reliance placed on the Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin. Mid-November was the time period when aircraft carriers were scheduled for replacement by newcomers from the States. He did not want this rotation to take place during our moon phase window. Nor did he want pilots who had just arrived in the theater and lacked seasoned experience in the area to undertake a highly sensitive support mission. He took this dilemma to his boss, Air Force Lt. Gen.

John Vogt, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations. Blackburn was well aware of our planning focus on using pilots who were experienced in the current war zone environment. That is why we mixed Jolly Green Giant helicopter and Skyraider fighter pilots from Southeast Asia with highly qualified stateside veterans. The only thing these trained crews needed were aircraft from combat units in Thailand. That was Blackburn's mindset when he, not understanding the ties between the aircraft carriers and their air wings, suggested that pilots of the departing USS *America* (CVA-66) be transferred to the USS *Ranger* (CVA-61) at Subic Bay in the Philippines so that her area-experienced aviators could fly from the *Ranger*'s deck once that carrier got to Yankee Station. He also wanted the Navy to accelerate the arrival of the aircraft carriers USS *Ranger* and USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) at Yankee Station and to delay the departure of the USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34) until after the completion of the raid. Vogt assured Blackburn that he would get the problem fixed.[1] Blackburn took him at his word and then, in spite of his sudden concern over this apparent planning oversight, did not even mention it to Manor and Simons throughout their long coordinating trip to Hawaii and Vietnam.

With that glitch, the concept of supporting the raid with resources readily available in the Gulf of Tonkin was put to the test. Normally, Task Force 77 (TF 77) had three carriers under its operational control. Of these three, one could be at Subic Bay undergoing routine maintenance with her staff performing shore duties and enjoying well-deserved rest and recuperation from the war zone. Another could be sent out to conduct a naval operation within the Seventh Fleet's domain. Such an operation might be nothing more than an occasional show of the U.S. flag in a foreign port. This in-theater scheduling did not degrade the capability of the Navy to wage the war with only two on-line carriers. What Blackburn and the Joint Chiefs saw in Washington was that there were only two carriers in the Gulf at the time of their discovery about the carrier deployment schedule and that the USS *America* was scheduled to depart on 8 November, leaving the USS *Oriskany* as the lone carrier until the arrival of the USS *Hancock* and the USS *Ranger.* The USS *Hancock* departed North Island Naval Air Station (NAS), San Diego, on 22 October, and the USS *Ranger* left Alameda NAS near San Francisco on 27 October.[2] There was sufficient time for both carriers to get to Yankee Station, but the Joint Chiefs sent a message to Admiral McCain concerning this matter

anyway. The text of this message is not recalled by anyone involved in the search for it more than thirty years later, but it generated some concerns in Hawaii. The commander of the Pacific Fleet questioned McCain's chief of staff about the reason for Washington's sudden interest in the carrier deployment schedule. Lt. Gen. Charles A. Corcoran, one of the two officers at CINCPAC who knew about the raid plans, told him to trust the received orders and to follow them.[3]

Coordination in Hawaii and Vietnam

Blackburn, Manor, and Simons departed for Vietnam on 1 November 1970. They stopped in Hawaii to brief Admiral McCain and his chief of staff, Army Lieutenant General Corcoran. They were ready to execute the rescue mission and were prepared to include the Navy on its details and on the type of support they needed from V. Adm. Frederick A. Bardshar, TF 77's commander, in the Gulf of Tonkin. McCain stressed that only those five present at their meeting were to know about the rescue plan and that thereafter they should deal directly with Bardshar and his staff. He was specific about bypassing the Pacific Fleet in Hawaii and the Seventh Fleet at Yokosuka, Japan, whose commander, V. Adm. Maurice F. Weisner, was Bardshar's boss.

The next step for McCain was to introduce his visitors to the officials in Saigon. It was time to inform them about the secret operation that was about to occur in their areas of responsibility. McCain offered the visitors his personal C-118 to continue their journey to Vietnam and alerted Army Gen. Creighton Abrams, head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, about the trio that was coming to see him. He did not elaborate on the purpose of their visit. Abrams sensed its importance and met them immediately after their arrival, along with his deputy commander, Gen. Lucius D. Clay, who was also the commander of the Seventh Air Force, and his chief of staff, Army Lt. Gen. Welborn Dolvin. Abrams was very attentive and eager to participate in the rescue effort. He was sadly disappointed when he learned that the raiding force was already fully staffed and that he would have no control over it because Manor and Simons were working directly for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. He promised Manor full air support.[4]

Seventh Air Force Coordination

Immediately after his encounter with the visitors, General Clay summoned the vice commander of the Seventh Air Force, Gen. Ernest Harding, and Brig. Gen. Darrell Cramer for another briefing by Bull Simons. Cramer described this meeting and the events that followed in a letter to the author:

> My involvement in the operation began one morning when I was called to General Clay's office. Already in the room were General Clay, General Ernest Harding, Vice Commander of the 7th Air Force, and an army officer, Colonel Bull Simons. In brief and simple terms, General Clay explained to me that 7th Air Force units were to become involved in a Special Forces air and ground operation of great importance which had the highest possible security classification. To [e]nsure the operation would not be compromised and the enemy alerted, there would be no electronic transmissions, i.e.[,] scrambler phone or encoded Teletype transmissions. Also, there would be no papers generated in the form of Operations Orders tasking the units. The entire operation was to be laid out and coordinated by person-to-person contact and briefings.
>
> General Clay then told me that the only people in the 7th Air Force Headquarters who would have knowledge of this operation were the three of us in the room at that time. He then assigned to me the task of getting the proper instructions to our units that would be involved. I returned to my office and spent some time deliberating just how to go about the assignment. For certain, my instructions to the participating wing/unit commanders should be precise and exactly the same in each case. I then jotted down points I should make in each briefing. They were as follows:
>
> 1. The wing/unit would soon be tasked to provide support for a highly classified special operation that could involve air sorties as well as other kinds of support for the operations forces. Within a few days two AF officers would arrive on the air base and identify themselves to the wing/unit commander. These officers would task the wing for its participation in the operation.
>
> 2. Without question, the wing/unit commander was to provide the support tasked.

3. If the wing commander felt he should not, or could not, comply with the tasking, he was to immediately get in an airplane and fly to 7th Air Force Headquarters in Saigon. He was to go directly to General Clay to present his problem. He was to discuss the subject with no one other than General Clay.

4. The wing/unit commander was to take every precaution possible to prevent this operation and his unit's tasking from becoming the subject of rumor and speculation. Keep it as low-key as possible and involve no more of his people than necessary to carry out the tasking.

I committed these instructions to memory and immediately began making the rounds of the 7th Air Force Wings/Units and bases involved. In each case the wing commander acknowledged his understanding of my instructions to him and his willingness to do all possible to make the operation a success.[5]

Cramer's first task was to arrange transportation for Manor and Simons to Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin for a meeting with Vice Admiral Bardshar. Cramer then visited all wing and unit commanders who would soon be required to support a mission whose location and purpose they could not question. Lt. Cols. Kraljev and Ropka, the two officers referred to in Cramer's letter, were not aware of his timely assistance and were later amazed by the cooperation they received from key commanders who had to implement their unusual requests.

Coordination at Yankee Station

Vice Admiral Bardshar, his chief of staff, Capt. Jack S. Kenyon Sr., and Cdr. P. D. Hoskins, TF 77 intelligence officer, greeted Brigadier General Manor and Colonel Simons aboard the aircraft carrier USS *America* on 5 November.[6] Their traveling companion Brigadier General Blackburn did not make the trip. He returned to Washington to handle matters at that end. Manor and Simons were extremely pleased by their reception and Bardshar's eagerness to participate. Manor recalls that Bardshar volunteered more than just a diversion. He has him saying, "How about letting me help you in the objective area?" Manor's polite answer was, "I don't need your help there. I've got everything all set up for the objective area, but if you will put this feint raid against North

Vietnam, it'll be a tremendous help. This will be on the night of the 21 November."[7]

Manor and Simons spent the night on Bardshar's flagship and then returned to Florida to witness the deployment to Thailand. Throughout their stay no one said anything about the carrier rotation schedule that troubled Blackburn before they departed from Washington.

The carrier rotation schedule was Bardshar's problem to address. He would see to it that he had three carriers on station by 21 November. He would not let any of them sit at Subic Bay or sail anywhere else and miss the action that could potentially have a tremendous impact on the conduct of the war. The USS *Oriskany*'s departure from Yankee Station could be delayed. The USS *Hancock* would become the Seventh Fleet's asset after crossing the international date line on 7 November. He could manipulate her schedule once the carrier showed up at Subic Bay. The USS *Ranger* was going to join the Seventh Fleet four days later.[8]

There was one other event where a bit of significant information failed to be shared. Without informing the traveling trio, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Thomas H. Moorer dispatched Navy Capt. William M. Campbell from the Chief of Naval Operations office to hand deliver Manor's Operation Kingpin plan to Bardshar. He also sent a personal encrypted message to Bardshar instructing him to meet with Campbell in Da Nang to receive something of interest. P. D. Hoskins was present when Bardshar received this message. Because his operations officer, Capt. Allen E. "Boot" Hill, had not yet returned from a temporary duty in Washington, Bardshar invited Hoskins to accompany him to this intriguing meeting.[9] Campbell delivered the Operation Kingpin plan on 7 November. He stressed the security considerations that obviously included the limited number of Navy officers who knew and who were authorized to know about the POW rescue plan.[10] No one told Campbell that Manor and Simons had already met with Bardshar. He believed that he was the first presenter of the POW rescue plan to his Navy colleagues. He admitted later that Bardshar and Hoskins seemed to have known about the secret he was revealing to them.

Overseas Challenges

Strict security became even more challenging once we deployed overseas. In Florida we had evolved into a dedicated group that understood the need

for the high level of security. Now we were entering the war zone, where we could not just show up unnoticed and execute our private mission. We needed a tremendous amount of support from many agencies that would certainly question our presence and purpose. The group's leaders and planners had to secure cooperation without compromising the POW rescue. The planners, Ropka, for example, remembered other well-planned rescue attempts, such as Crimson Tide in the Mekong Delta, which ended with disastrous results because of delays and changes to the original plan by otherwise well-intentioned individuals and units that wanted to contribute to the mission's effort on their own terms. We had that part well in hand. Our commander had the full authority to execute the rescue mission. He responded directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and our plan could not be altered by those whose participation and support we needed. Manor's magic letter from the chief of staff of the Air Force was unprecedented but very clear. Clearer still was the word from Seventh Air Force Lieutenant General Clay that Brigadier General Cramer passed on in person to each key subordinate commander. He told them that if they had any problems with requests from the visiting members of Manor's staff, they should hop on a plane and discuss their reservations with the Seventh Air Force commander in Saigon. That opened all the doors Manor and his top planners needed.

Soliciting unconditional support from the top theater commanders was a very good first step. However, their endorsements still did not preclude a possible mission compromise triggered by suspicious questions at intermediate command levels and field units that would be obliged to give us their no-questions-asked support. So it became necessary to forestall such developments by touching base with the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon to inform the commander that several of his field units would be tasked to provide aircraft for a very important mission, that two of their tankers and crews would be trained in night refueling operations, and that there would be a need for nighttime standby for first-light search and rescue. Such coordination accomplished three things: the 3rd ARR Group would not question its rescue squadrons about why they were shifting helicopters among their units. Next, they would accept having two additional tanker aircraft on temporary duty at Udorn. Finally, they would not question why and under whose authority their helicopters and tankers were conducting refueling training at night. In turn, involved subordinate units would not be requesting authority from their higher echelons of com-

mand to do any of those unusual things. Another example of the same would be a possible reaction of the 1964th Communications Group at Tan Son Nhut. How would that command react to learning that its subordinate unit at Da Nang was installing a dedicated voice circuit from the Monkey Mountain Command Post to the National Military Command Center in Washington? Surely that would generate serious questions and arouse suspicions that something really big was about to happen. So it was important that the presence of the raiders in the war zone would not disturb the otherwise normal operations of any unit we had to tap for support. The planners accomplished this coordination in a commendable manner. Our presence did not cause any suspicious stir because the key people were not left out of the picture and they supported the effort with the understanding that its purpose was beyond their need to know.

Theater Coordination

Blackburn, Manor, and Simons briefed the top-level commanders about our mission, but Lieutenant Colonels Kraljev, Ropka, and Willett simply informed subordinate commanders that their field units would be tasked to support a highly sensitive mission executed by a stateside-based brigadier general under the direct command of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They also carried Manor's powerful letter of introduction from the USAF Chief of Staff, General Ryan. They could use it if they encountered a hesitant unit commander who had reservations about being kept in the dark. Earlier forewarning by Brigadier General Cramer did not ease the curiosity level of the commanders involved, but it helped to secure their unquestioning compliance. Manor's staff officers had to rely on their knowledge of Southeast Asia to move from base to base on any opportune airlift just as an ingenious soldier would do while on leave or on permissive temporary duty. This presented them with some interesting scheduling problems, but they accomplished all needed arrangements on time. They were the right people for this type of assignment.

Lieutenant Colonel Kraljev's Contacts

Ben Kraljev personally contacted a few key people who absolutely, positively needed to know that their subordinate units would soon be involved

in a very sensitive mission whose objective could not yet be revealed to them. He met the commander of the 3rd ARR Group at Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon. His field units from Vietnam and Thailand would have to provide helicopters and refueling tankers for an unprecedented nighttime operation that could also require a predawn search and rescue. Up to that time, all helicopter operations were conducted during daytime hours. Ben assured him that properly trained crews would be doing the flying. All he needed from him was airframes for a single operation. His tanker crews would receive all required night refueling training in Thailand.

Kraljev then visited Cam Ranh Bay AB, where he arranged for the 39th Rescue Squadron to provide two HC-130P tanker aircraft to refuel the Assault Formation helicopters. These tanker crews would deploy to Udorn RTAFB, where Maj. William J. Kornitzer Jr., an instructor pilot from Eglin AFB, would refine their skills in nighttime helicopter refueling.

Kraljev arranged with the 37th Rescue Squadron at Da Nang to transfer two HH-3Es to Udorn. It is doubtful if the commander would have believed Ben had he told him that these helicopters would be stripped of all nonessential equipment; that one of them would never come back, and that Lt. Col. Royal C. Brown, his operations officer who was on temporary duty in Florida, would be involved in this mysterious mission. On the other hand, the 37th squadron never told Kraljev that the two HH-3Es were the only ones left in Southeast Asia and that they were already scheduled for deactivation and transfer to Kadena AB in Okinawa.

Finally, Kraljev stopped at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand to visit the 56th Special Operations Wing commander. He requested seven of his most reliable A-1Es (five for an imminent but unspecified mission and two for spares). All were to be armed with special ordnance borrowed from the Navy and equipped with special electronics that would be installed by technicians flown in from the United States. Ben requested no pilots and never told the commander who would fly his aircraft. What an odd request to make of a wing commander!

He also arranged a standby alert for a possible first-light rescue mission immediately after the raid. Our plans called for air rescue by in-theater forces for anyone who got shot down or was stranded on the ground. Assault Formation helicopters loaded with rescued POWs could not risk conducting unscheduled rescue operations. Neither could the returning Strike Formation A-1Es. They would be running low on fuel.

Lieutenant Colonel Ropka's Contacts

Larry Ropka coordinated with several installations in Thailand. His first contact at Takhli could not believe what Larry wanted him to do. The base was in its final stages of deactivation. Larry knew Takhli very well, and the commander in charge of the base closing was surprised by his knowledge of the facilities, which included one secret and secure Central Intelligence Agency complex. The Heavy Chain program Larry had managed from his Air Staff office had used Takhli as a staging base for its C-130s. These C-130s employed the same sophisticated navigational systems as the Combat Talons. The FLIR system that Larry procured for use on the raid came from that program. We needed the secure CIA staging buildings to house the Army Special Forces and several other facilities for our crews and aircraft. Takhli would become our transportation hub. Four MAC C-141s would bring in the raiders with their equipment, palletized napalm bombs, and one Huey helicopter that could be used as a Banana spare. Then three airlift C-130s would arrive from U-Tapao RTAFB to provide the visitors with dedicated airlift support. In spite of his bewilderment over this unexpected disruption to his carefully planned gradual closing down of U.S. facilities, the commander willingly opened up recently locked doors and expanded dwindling bed-down and feeding facilities for the number of people Larry said would be coming.

Ropka's next stop was U-Tapao, where he arranged for the three airlift C-130s from the Tactical Air Command's Airlift Control Element. These aircraft would shuttle raid support participants who had to be brought to Takhli for briefings and returned to their home bases to do mission preparations. They were also needed to fly the raiders and their equipment to separate launching bases just hours before the scheduled takeoff for the raid. Larry also tasked the Strategic Air Command's 307th Strategic Wing to furnish in-flight refueling for MIGCAP F-4s and Wild Weasel F-105s.

Udorn was to become the critical staging base for the Army Special Forces raiders, assault helicopters, HC-130P tankers, and MIGCAP F-4s. After the mission all other raiding aircraft were to recover there for a big welcome of rescued POWs and the necessary post-mission debriefings. Larry contacted the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron that flew the HH-53s and requested their seven best helicopters for a highly classified nighttime mission. He did not ask for any crews and

did not tell the commander that two of his pilots, Maj. Jay M. Strayer and Capt. William M. McGeorge, who had been away in Florida on a mysterious temporary duty, would be coming back to fly in some of them. Larry specified that the operation would require four of his squadron's most experienced pararescuemen (PJs) to augment the crews in four of the five helicopters. We needed only five to fly the mission; two would be spares. The squadron commander had nine helicopters ready when it was time to launch the mission. Larry also informed this commander that he would receive two HH-3Es from Da Nang and that these would have to be stripped of all nonessential equipment and be ready to go on the same mission with the HH-53s. In addition, on the night when these helicopters would be put to use, he would have to schedule a special nighttime rescue standby for a possible first-light recovery of any downed crews. Normal rescue standbys were scheduled only for daylight operations.

Still at Udorn, Larry contacted the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing commander for his ten best-qualified F-4D crews for a MIGCAP mission that could not be discussed. His designated mission planners should be ready for a C-130 flight to Takhli, where the initial planning for their mission would take place.

At Korat, Larry coordinated similar support from the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing commander for the use of his 6010th Wild Weasel Squadron's F-105s. Because of the bombing pause and a slowdown of combat flying, his request was welcomed with enthusiasm. He also forewarned the wing about the unscheduled arrival of three College Eye C-121 aircraft from McClellan AFB.

Larry's efforts took a heavy toll on him. He met all the requirements but ended up going without sleep for almost three days before and during the raid.

Lieutenant Colonel Willett's Contacts

Homer Willett had a very busy schedule in both Vietnam and Thailand. He had to start with his frequently visited friends at the 1964th Communications Group in Saigon to inform them about what he would be doing with their subordinate units during this temporary duty visit. They had good reasons to question why he needed to reinstall secure telephones and Teletype at Takhli, a base that was being closed down and from which this equipment had just been removed. Likewise, they would be raising

their eyebrows as to why he was going to have the Defense Communications Agency install a dedicated and secure voice circuit between the Tactical Air Control Center–North Sector at Monkey Mountain and the National Military Command Center in Washington. He informed his good friend Col. Robert Sadler that it was for an operation with people who would also need several new radio frequencies. All this was required for only one special mission after which everything would be disassembled and restored to normal status. As strange as this seemed, Homer had no problems obtaining full support. He also borrowed two KY-8 cryptographic black boxes for use on the two C-130 Cherries.

On a very routine basis, Homer checked in with his acquaintances in the 505th Tactical Control Group and informed his friend Col. William Lehman that newly modified EC-121Ts were coming and would be used to conduct equipment tests with Tactical Air Control Center radars at Udorn and Monkey Mountain. There was nothing strange about this arrangement. Long-anticipated modification appeared to be moving somewhat ahead of schedule.

Homer went from Saigon to Da Nang, where he briefed the commander of the Tactical Control Squadron on the new encrypted digital data link equipment and its testing with the Tactical Air Control Center. He also briefed him on command post space for Brigadier General Manor, who would soon conduct a highly classified joint service operation inside North Vietnam. He extracted a promise that when this time came, he would have his best team staffing the command post. Homer also explained the extra communications requirements, including a direct line to the National Military Command Center in Washington.

The EC-121Ts would be able to use the newly installed digital data link for the first time in a combat environment. That was exciting! The Air Force would finally acquire a system to match the Navy's Tactical Data System. But the Tactical Air Control Center's commander would not learn the purpose of Manor's mission until the raiding force crossed the mountain ranges and entered the Red River Valley. That is when Homer planned to tell his friend why this curious operation was happening.

Then it was time to go to Thailand. Three overloaded C-121 Super Connies would be arriving at Korat on 12 November. Larry Ropka had already prepared the wing for their arrival, but there was some equipment for the test that had arrived on MAC aircraft before them. Homer had arranged for its timely delivery, but no one at Korat knew what it was or

what to do with it. Otherwise, the contingent from McClellan would feel quite at home at Korat. This was the forward operating base for College Eye, and all the people who were arriving had been there before. Their testing of new equipment would not be an unusual event.

Homer had to go south to U-Tapao to connect with the 307th Strategic Wing that had specially configured radio relay KC-135s orbiting around the clock over the Gulf of Tonkin. Manor's command post had to monitor four additional UHF frequencies that the raiders planned to use on the ground at Son Tay. Homer had to ensure that the technicians installed them on the aircraft that would fly on the night of the raid.

From U-Tapao, Homer flew north to Udorn to coordinate with the 621st Tactical Control Squadron on the College Eye digital data link test and the use of its center as an alternate to the Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain in Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Kraljev planned to be in this center during the raid. This tactical control center, with its far-reaching radar coverage, provided routine assistance to aircraft in tanker hookups and monitored all traffic over Thailand, Laos, and parts of both Vietnams. It also maintained continuous contact with the Airborne Command and Control Center's C-130 that flew around the clock over Laos.

Homer Willett did not leave out a dot. He completed his coordination without any hedging on the part of his supporters. His knowledge of the commanders and professional know-how of what was needed paid off handsomely.

Coordination by Major Grimes

Keith Grimes was left pretty much alone in his role as our weatherman. We were surprised to learn after our deployment that it was harder for him to get access to weather information for North Vietnam than it was for Kraljev and Ropka to obtain aircraft, crews, and equipment. We did not concern ourselves with the weather at our Eglin planning and did not understand the problems we would have once we showed up at Takhli. During our prior tours of duty in Southeast Asia we had access to classified weather channels whenever we had a mission. It did not occur to us that this service would not be forthcoming to a task force that was not supposed to be in the theater in the first place and one that would try to set up operations at an inactive base with limited secure communications

facilities. Keith was left to his own devices to arrange for current weather information for the Son Tay area without arousing any suspicions. He counted on his knowledge of weather data processing and forecasting to bypass many of the usual channels. That did not work.

Now we know that our forces in Southeast Asia were using weather data obtained from a super-secret defense military satellite program. But at the time of the raid very few officials knew that such a source existed. Information obtained from this program had to be carefully purged of all ties to its origin and passed on to the users as data obtained from the National Weather Service satellite, whose products could be shared with other nations, including the Soviet Union, under the "peaceful use of space" agreement made by President Johnson.[11] Keith knew about this program, but because he was assigned to the Air University he was out of the loop and no longer had access to it. He did not even have the benefit of a prior introduction from Brigadier General Cramer, which had so eased the coordinating tasks for Kraljev and Ropka. Cramer's personal visits were confined to the commanders who had operational aircraft and crews.

Keith Grimes was very frustrated over this impasse. The commander of the First Weather Group in Saigon, Lt. Col. Leonard E. Zapinski, was of a different mindset from the commanders of operational aircraft units. The Air Weather Service, through its parent Military Airlift Command, had its own restrictions and release authority for access to classified weather data.[12] So even though the Seventh Air Force had forewarned Zapinski about a visitor from a special Joint Contingency Task Group who would require no-questions-asked cooperation, he opted to stick with his own command's restrictions and deny Keith direct access to the satellite information. Keith's frustration with this impasse is best expressed in his own words:

> There seemed to be a great deal of resentment on Colonel Zapinski's part that I, someone who was out of Air Weather Service at this particular time, would be coming in with any sort of authority at all, to levy requirements on the 1st Weather Group. He made no hesitation at all in informing me of his strong resentment and irritation that Maj. Keith Grimes, outside of channels, outside of Air Weather Service, was coming through expecting to get support from Air Weather Service. He informed me that as far as he was concerned, I had no

> authority for any support of his resources at all. . . . I mentioned to him that this decision was not his to make, that he was simply to make certain facilities, information, and people available to me as I saw fit. He was very irritated by what I had to say. As far as he was concerned, and he told me specifically again, I had no authority, I had no call and no right, whatever, and that he felt completely unobliged to render assistance in any form.[13]

How unfortunate for Keith Grimes. He did not have the same letter from General Ryan that other planners had carried. Manor had to resolve his access problem by a personal message from the director of operations, USAF headquarters, to the vice commander of the Seventh Air Force.[14]

Zapinski finally responded by providing Keith with two of his best forecasters, S. M. Sgt. Dennis H. Van Houdt and M. Sgt. Loyal E. Ralston. Ralston made a hurried trip to Takhli, where he quickly grasped the significance of the impending operation. After he returned to Saigon and briefed his boss, the raid received its due attention. It was too late and not very practical to reinstall secure Teletype for weath-er transmission to Takhli, but the Joint Contingency Task Group received even better service. Ralston and Van Houdt had to fly in with fresh classified weather data in a T-39 that was available to Manor and his staff.

Keith had more luck with the commander of the 10th Weather Squadron at Udorn, Col. Albert J. Kaehn. Kaehn had not been forewarned, but when Grimes and Manor visited him, he realized that a visit from a brigadier general signaled something very important and he gave them his full cooperation. It was needed to obtain up-to-date weather for the raider route through Laos into North Vietnam and for local area weather within Laos in case someone from the raiding force ended up on the ground there and required rescue by Udorn's Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Center. Kaehn offered the unique assistance of Lt. Col. Frank A. Ross, a weatherman who was also a qualified fighter pilot. He would fly a weather reconnaissance route up to the border of North Vietnam to verify the latest forecast of Ralston and Van Houdt just before the raiders were to depart for their mission. Another individual, the weather observer from Detachment 75, Sgt. Wayne E. Fuiten, who was a well-established expert on Laos weather with three tours in the theater, was recruited to stand by for any emergency that would require a rescue of anyone from Laos.[15]

Coordination by Major Andraitis

Art Andraitis went directly from Eglin to Yokota AB in Japan on 13 November to study photographs that were taken by SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft on 6 and 13 November. He had all the necessary security clearances for access to the films as soon as they were delivered to him from Okinawa. No one questioned his interest in the ground coverage he wanted to view and, because he did not need assistance with any of the sophisticated photo equipment, he could process and copy exactly what he needed without anyone paying attention to him.

Aerial photography played a significant role in our planning. We all received a good introduction to the art of photo interpreting from Capt. Jake Jacobs. He showed us low-altitude drone and high-altitude SR-71 photographs of several time periods that revealed different levels of activity in the Son Tay area. He was not happy with our self-imposed restrictions on requests for photo coverage with low-altitude tracks directly over the camp for fear of calling the enemy's attention to our increased interest in a specific location. Several photo reconnaissance routes that had been flown since we began our planning had missed the target. They initiated a turn at the wrong time or encountered cloud cover. Photographs taken on 3 October 1970 disturbed Jake greatly. As he pointed out to us, there was an obvious lack of activity in the courtyard as compared with earlier photographs. He even suggested that the camp might have been abandoned. But since there was no pictorial evidence of a change in activity in areas outside the prison walls, we reached a general conclusion that the POWs were under a lockdown condition that drastically restricted their daily activity inside the courtyard. Nevertheless, this development troubled Jake and he was very anxious to see the photographs that Andraitis would bring to Takhli from Yokota. When Art arrived with these new photographs on 17 November, Jake was relieved because they clearly showed renewed activity inside the prison walls.

Coordination by Major Peshkin

The three C-130 shuttle crews from U-Tapao showed up just after Dick Peshkin arrived at Takhli with the last aircraft from Eglin. He briefed them and swore them to secrecy on a cover story he dreamed up just

for them. We did not want anyone to find out that we had brought in a stateside-trained force for a special mission. They were not to discuss their assignments with other airlift aircrews and were not to question the contents of any cargo or unusual equipment and weapons carried by their passengers. After that they worked for him. He became their scheduler and sent them here and there on short notice.

Finally, just before the mission launch time, Peshkin went to Udorn to brief the hospital commander. He found him very relaxed at the Officers' Club bar. After getting his attention, he told him to prepare his hospital for a possible large number of patients. Some of these patients might have combat injuries and others might suffer from various medical problems that would require immediate attention. The commander did not need to know more than that. Peshkin assured him that this emergency hospital care would be of a short duration because two C-141 air evacs would soon appear to take the patients away. This very puzzled hospital commander probably did not believe any of this until the two C-141s actually showed up in the wee hours of the next morning.[16]

Coordination by Major Macomber

Tom Macomber was the most secretive of our group. His primary interest was operational security. He did not work with us directly, but he observed everything that was happening all around us. As a true intelligence professional, he is still reluctant to talk about the contacts he made in Southeast Asia and what he actually accomplished. Major Andraitis and Captain Knops were of the same professional mold. We know little about how they accomplished their coordination with intelligence agencies whose support we needed. We did not even know that Tom would fly in the alternate Combat Apple from Okinawa until he departed from Takhli in a T-39 with Colonel Frisbie and two Army Special Forces planners—Lt. Col. Bill L. Robinson and Sgt. Maj. Donald M. Davis. These two knew the ground assault plans.

Only a few of us remember Tom's subdued concern when he saw our commander Manor at Takhli dressed in his bright blue fighter pilot's flight suit that clearly showed his general's rank. Locals did not need to know that our operation included a brigadier general. He had Manor switch into standard jungle fatigues so that he would blend in with the rest of us.

Final Mission Planning at Takhli

Our planning at Eglin was so thorough that we did not anticipate many changes to our route and timing once we came face to face with planners of the supporting Southeast Asia units. We needed to incorporate the HC-130 tankers into our formation routing. Then we had to coordinate our on-target times with high-altitude Air Force and Navy fighters and the C-121 College Eye airborne radar platform crews. At the time of our departure from Eglin, we had not yet included the Wild Weasels in our MIG trap scenario even though we discussed the need for their SAM suppression capability in our conference room bull sessions where all ideas received due critical review. Manor made the decision for their inclusion after our deployment. Much later we learned from Colonel Frisbie's memoirs that the F-105 Wild Weasel subject first came up when he and Manor briefed the Tactical Air Command's General Momyer on the POW rescue plan. Momyer recommended that the raiders use a couple of F-105s for SAM suppression.[17]

Our ever-present counterintelligence officers reopened one recently sealed building, and Major Beyea swept it electronically, securing it for our TOP SECRET crew briefings and mission planning. The whole facility was put to immediate use by officer crew members of the Cherries, Apples, and Peaches. They had nothing else to do at Takhli except to study their flight plans and charts and rehash their already well-rehearsed in-flight tactics. Such group study was especially important for the Cherry crews because they had to know the timing and airborne maneuvers for both formations. At that time we still did not know which crew was going to be selected to take off as the helicopter lead ship and which one was going to escort the fighters. Both crews coveted the helicopter lead role. It was the more prestigious one. It was the one that would drop flares over the prison yard and deliver the Green Berets to the target area. It was also the more hazardous one and the one that required more challenging formation flying skills. We knew right from the beginning that the crew selected for the A-1E escort would accept its final role with a degree of disappointment.

When the key planners of other participating units arrived in the C-130 shuttles for in-briefing and mission planning, our secure building became overcrowded. We had to ask the Florida-trained crews to leave and make room for the newcomers. As we anticipated, the POW rescue

plan was a stunning surprise to all of them. No one had any reservations about its bold concept. They showed immediate enthusiasm and eagerly incorporated their roles into our overall plan. F-4 and F-105 planners had an additional incentive to throw themselves vigorously into their planning assignments. Many members of their squadrons had been shot down over North Vietnam, and the prospect of bringing some of them home would be the biggest event of their tour of duty in the Vietnam War (see appendix table 4, Air Force Planners in Southeast Asia).

HC-130P Tankers

The Assault Formation tanker planning group was the largest one. It consisted of officer crew members of both HC-130Ps from the 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Cam Ranh Bay AB in Vietnam. Udorn was their regular forward operating base, where they would come with two aircraft at a time for a three-day temporary duty to fly normal daylight search-and-rescue missions (SARs). This time the two aircraft came to Udorn on an extended temporary duty for nighttime helicopter refueling training that was to be conducted by Maj. William J. Kornitzer Jr. They did not know what kind of mission awaited them at the end. Kornitzer was the raid's C-130 tanker mission commander who had come with us from Eglin AFB, where he was a member of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center's staff. To fit in with our Fruit Salad formation, their aircraft call signs became Lime One and Lime Two. Lime One was represented by Capt. Richard E. Frank, its aircraft commander; Maj. Jerry T. Felmley, copilot; and Capt. Charles P. McNeff, navigator. Lime Two's aircraft commander was Capt. Clyde O. Westbrook Jr., with Capt. John H. Pletcher Jr. as copilot and Capt. Bruce J. Host as navigator.

The HC-130P refueling track meshed with the track we charted at Eglin. Our low-level Assault Formation route did not have to be altered. All our timing from the desired 2:18 A.M. H-hour over Son Tay was backed up to the time for the helicopter takeoff from Udorn. Assault helicopters would take off at 11:17 P.M. and their tankers ten minutes earlier. There would be no radio communications with the tower. All aircraft would take off in the dark on a green light signal from the tower. Radio silence was to be maintained throughout the flight to Son Tay.

All helicopters would form behind Lime One immediately after take-

off. They would take on a full load of fuel before reaching the Skyline TACAN in central Laos. The moon would be just above the horizon, thus providing additional visibility during refueling. After the completion of this inbound refueling, Cherry One would take over the formation lead somewhere on a long flight leg after crossing the Skyline TACAN. Lime Two would monitor the refueling process and remain in orbit over Laos. Fuel-depleted Lime One would return to Udorn to pick up a new fuel load and rejoin Lime Two. Both would wait for the return of the Apples, which would require fuel before recovering at Udorn.

F-4 MIGCAP

In the next group, also from Udorn, were F-4D fighter pilots from the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing. Their mission was to fly combat air patrol (CAP) against the MIGs (MIGCAP). The wing commander designated Maj. Kenneth L. Gardner to serve as their project officer. He brought with him three pilots who would fly as MIGCAP flight leaders: Capt. John L. Cantwell from the 13th, and Maj. Orville B. Baird and Capt. Stuart McCurdy from the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron. They understood the hazardous mission we laid upon them. They were to be airborne as provocative targets whose presence over Son Tay should convince the enemy not to launch night-alert MIGs against our raiding formations.

Enthusiastic planners decided to launch two waves of F-4s to fly a high-altitude MIGCAP in two racetrack orbits. One would be over the heavily defended mountain north of Hanoi that American pilots nicknamed "Thud Ridge," and the other was just west-southwest of Son Tay over Mount Ba Vi. Each orbit would have two F-4s flying a five-minute racetrack pattern at seventeen thousand and nineteen thousand feet that would permit them to protect each other on every turn. A fifth F-4 would fly as a spare and hold over the Red River near Phu Tho. The first wave of five aircraft was scheduled to reach assigned orbits about ten minutes before Cherry One's flare drop over the prison compound. This timing also ensured that the Na San early warning radar would be monitoring the F-4s while our Assault and Strike Formations moved through its exposed southeastern sector. The second wave of five F-4s would be launched thirty-five minutes after the first one. It would replace the first wave of aircraft after they completed their planned thirty minutes on station.

Both waves would refuel from KC-135s while inbound and again as necessary on their return to Udorn. Their call signs would be Falcon One through Five for the first wave and Falcon Eleven through Fifteen for the second wave.

This daring, in-your-face scenario devised by the MIGCAP representatives impressed us. F-4s would be orbiting over the heaviest enemy defenses of the war. Depending on their in-flight locations and headings, they would be within several SAM and AAA sites at all times. But they would be just northeast and southwest of Phuc Yen Air Base with night-alert MIG 21s. From their orbits they would be able to pounce upon any MIGs right after they took off. The MIGs would become easy prey for them no matter what direction they took upon departing. They would have the F-4s on their tails before they could get properly oriented during their climb to an altitude from which they could respond to vectoring instructions from their radar ground controllers. This presumes that they could communicate while we jammed their communications frequencies with the A-1E Skyraiders. Our intelligence revealed that North Vietnamese air defense tactics taught by their Soviet advisors made MIG pilots totally reliant on instructions from the ground controllers. These instructions were so detailed that the controllers would tell the pilots not only where their potential targets were but also when they should jettison their external fuel tanks, arm their missiles, and even when they should go into afterburners.

The F-4s planned to top off their fuel tanks from KC-135 tankers over Laos and use up six hundred gallons of fuel from their external centerline tanks, which would be jettisoned prior to reaching their orbits. This weight reduction would give them better flight control and maneuverability for air-to-air combat with the MIGs. Each Falcon would be armed with four AIM-7 radar guided missiles and two AIM-9 infrared homing missiles.

F-105 Wild Weasels

In the first group that came in from Korat RTAFB were F-105 pilots from the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing's 6010th Wild Weasel Squadron. Their wing commander designated Lt. Col. Robert J. Kronebusch to lead the SAM suppression mission and spearhead the planning at Takhli. Kronebusch was still on leave when the C-130 shuttle

came by to pick them up, so he was represented at the first briefing by Lt. Col. William J. Starkey and their intelligence officer, Capt. Nina Gusev, the only female participant in the raid planning. They also understood their hazardous role in the mission. The presence of F-4s in two MIGCAP orbits would most likely ensure that the enemy would employ SAM defenses against the high-flying targets. Their task was to play an electronic chess game with SAM control radars and fire Shrike air-to-ground missiles at those that succeeded in locking on their aircraft. Together with Udorn's F-4 planners they plotted their SAM suppression in a northwest-to-southeast oriented figure-eight orbit that was between the two MIGCAP stations. Their call signs would be Firebird One through Five. Firebirds One through Four would stack up at thousand-foot intervals between twelve thousand and fifteen thousand feet and be spread out so that they could protect each other as they made their left-hand orbit turns. In this configuration there would be at least one of them within a 45-degree angle from a menacing radar site. From such vantage point a Wild Weasel could turn in quickly for a direct head-on diving attack. The fifth Firebird would hold west of the Red River as a spare for anyone getting hit or running out of ordnance. Wild Weasels planned to be in their orbits at the same time as the MIGCAP F-4s.

When Kronebusch presented the Wild Weasel plan, operations planners for the raiding force were both impressed and relieved. It was the best cover for the ground and low-level Son Tay operation that could be devised. All realized the risks the F-105 and F-4 crews would be taking on their behalf.

To avoid an overlap between the Air Force and the Navy fighters, Manor established a dividing line along the 106-degree, 10-minute east longitude. The Air Force was to keep its fighters to the west and the Navy, to the east of this line. The rules of engagement would be the same for both services. Their respective MIGCAP and SAM suppression fighters would be fully armed for combat, but they were not supposed to initiate any attacks unless they acquired positive indications that they were targeted by enemy forces and had to defend themselves.

The Falcon and Firebird planners determined that they would require ten KC-135s from U-Tapao to support their sorties. Since the tankers would fly in their usual refueling orbits over Laos, their crews would not require any knowledge of the mission that would be flown by their refueling customers. Nevertheless, a representative from the 307th Strategic

Wing from U-Tapao was present when the participants of all aircraft types gave their final mission plan briefings.

EC-121T College Eye

Once the men of the 552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing settled down in their quarters at Korat, they began a coordinated twenty-four-hour work schedule to prepare their aircraft for operational flights with the new modification systems. They were ready to fly over Thailand and Laos in two days. Each crew consisted of seventeen men. Six of them were flight crew members: two pilots, two navigators, and two flight engineers. The other eleven were technical crews: one weapons controller, one radio operator, six radar operators, and three radar technicians. Of the twenty-two crew members who had to operate the new T model system, only ten had any prior experience with it. Many of the new avionics components had never been activated before because of emission restrictions within U.S. airspace. There were no manuals and no approved checklists, only notes and papers accumulated by those who participated in Category I and II test flights.

Senior noncommissioned officers Chevrier, Crossman, and Walker, the men who had the most experience with the new equipment, became the workhorses for training the rest of the crew. They scheduled two equipment shakedown and training flights a day. They would fly with one crew from 8:00 A.M. until noon and then land and take off again at 1:30 P.M. in the second aircraft with another full crew for a repeat four-hour flight. This went on for three days, with these sergeants putting in at least sixteen-hour workdays. They maintained this schedule even though two of them suffered from nagging respiratory problems that should have placed them in duty not involving flying (DNIF) status. Their crew rest was a problem because the noncommissioned officers and the airmen stayed in double-bunk open-bay barracks with fifty men who slept and worked at odd hours.

This was not an R&R (rest and recuperation) trip for any of them. Everyone was kept busy. Every man knew that his job was important and felt pride in being chosen for this task. Mulherron and Wright made an overnight trip to the Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain to verify that the equipment the command post used to receive encrypted automated air traffic data from the Naval Tactical Data System was the same as the one the new EC-121T systems required.

There was not much interface with other College Eye crews that flew regular daytime missions over Laos and the Gulf of Tonkin. These crews would come to Korat for a fifteen-day temporary duty (TDY) from their main operating base at Tainan, Taiwan. They would fly daytime missions every other day and then return to Taiwan for seven days before coming back to Korat. They knew that a new major aircraft modification was forthcoming, and the activity they witnessed the McClellan guys doing was considered quite normal for a developmental effort.[18]

As the noncommissioned officers recall, both aircraft and their crews were ready to fly the Son Tay support mission as of 17 November. Lt. Col. Jake Mulherron and weapons controllers Captain Bomhoff and Captain Edney were the only officers from the College Eye group who came in from Korat to receive mission briefings and to coordinate their timing and tactics with the raiding force's plans. Bomhoff did not arrive with the two new aircraft. He belonged to the wing at McClellan but was already on temporary duty to the College Eye Detachment Task Force at Korat, where he worked in the operations office.

Reaction of the three College Eye newcomers was much the same as that of the planners from the fighter and tanker units. Jake Mulherron was the only one of them who had prior knowledge about the POW rescue, but he knew nothing about the detailed raid plans we had developed in Florida. At first, they were stunned by the daring intrusion deep into North Vietnam, but as they heard the entire plan unfold, they realized that rescuing the POWs was possible and they became enthusiastic supporters of such a noble effort. Security aspects of this important mission were stressed with them again and again. Too many lives were at stake, and any detection of loose tongues could very well lead to the scrubbing of the whole mission. For that reason, the planners would not reveal a thing about the coming operation after returning to Korat. The exact date of the mission had not yet been set, and there was a chance that the raid could be launched and then recalled and possibly rescheduled on a later date.

Both EC-121Ts would take off from Korat and fly their previously used tracks over the Gulf of Tonkin. Since there would be no conflict between our flight tracks, their planners were interested primarily in the location of our target area and the types of aircraft they would have to monitor with their airborne radar. They needed our communications frequencies, IFF squawk codes, and desired time to be in orbit. They planned to have both of their aircraft, with call signs Frog One and Frog Two, in orbit just south of the Naval Carrier Task Force 77 diversionary tracks.

Other USAF Aircraft

The single representative from U-Tapao's 307th Strategic Wing who came to Takhli, Maj. Lee A. Snowberger, did not have to do any planning. Refueling support from the twelve KC-135s would be routine. The only exception was the unusual nighttime scheduling. Ten tankers would fly on regular refueling tracks over Laos and two would go over the Gulf of Tonkin. There they would provide fuel for two Air Force Combat Apple RC-135Ms and for one radio relay RC-135. If necessary, they could also refuel some of the Navy tankers if their on-board fuel ran low. The F-4 and F-105 fighter units would coordinate their refueling requirements using normal mission tasking procedures. We were delighted to learn that the refueling tracks requested by the USAF fighters would complement our Fruit Salad call signs. The two refueling tracks were named Lemon and Orange!

We also tasked the 307th Wing to provide an extra RC-135 radio relay aircraft that normally orbited around the clock over the Gulf of Tonkin. There was no need to brief the crew of this aircraft on our mission. Their aircraft would be configured with additional equipment to monitor four more UHF channels used by the raiders. It would fly its normal orbit route over the Gulf and maintain radio relay contact with the Navy's TF 77 and the Monkey Mountain Command Post.

Combat Apple RC-135M, operated by the 376th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, did not have a planning representative. Support for our mission would be a normal part of its crew's daily operation. Combat Apple maintained around-the-clock orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin and was linked with the Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain. Colonel Frisbie would be on board this aircraft. He had chaired the initial Son Tay planning group and was completely read in on all air and ground operations. Because of this, he was designated the alternate Joint Contingency Task Group commander, who could take over if something happened that would prevent Manor from exercising his command and control from Monkey Mountain. Accompanying Colonel Frisbie would be U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Robinson, who was intimately familiar with the Son Tay ground operations plan. To get Robinson on board this SAC aircraft, he had to obtain a TOP SECRET Sensitive Information clearance. To ensure that there was an airborne backup, a second RC-135M would be launched to orbit just south of the primary aircraft.

Major Thomas E. Macomber from the Pentagon's counterintelligence team and Sgt. Maj. Donald M. Davis, who was a member of the feasibility study group, would fly on this alternate Combat Apple.

Pararescuemen from Udorn

Major Donohue's Apple Three was the only HH-53 helicopter with a full Eglin AFB crew. His helicopter was a gunship, and the crew had to train together for this unique role. The other Super Jolly Green Giant helicopter crews came to Thailand short one pararescueman (PJ). They did not need special training for our formation flying. Consequently, we needed four PJ volunteers from the 40th ARRSq to augment the rest of the Apples. This number also guaranteed that we had at least one combat crew member on these helicopters who was current on theater rules of engagement.

Volunteering came easy for the four staff sergeant PJs. They were John J. Eldridge, Wayne L. Fisk, John K. Hoberg, and Randy S. McComb. All had just minutes to pack up their belongings before our shuttle C-130 picked them up and brought them to Takhli. They grew apprehensive about what they had gotten themselves into when they were ushered into the CIA facility where a high security fence had been constructed not to keep intruders out but to ensure that its occupants were kept in. They discovered that the place was full of Army Green Berets, but they were kept separate in a small, comfortably air-conditioned room of their own. Wayne Fisk best describes what happened next:

> Now, we were told when we got there that we could not discuss any aspect of why we were there. No problem; we had nothing to discuss anyway. We got into our bunks that night and settled down.
>
> At about 0300 the next morning, there was loud banging on the door. The door flew open, the lights flashed on—we are half asleep, of course—and there before us are a bunch of familiar faces; guys who were supposed to be back in the States; now they were over here. Now we had been told the rooms were bugged, so we couldn't talk about any portion of the mission, had we known what it was. The new guys started talking. We immediately put our fingers to our lips for silence and pointed to the ceiling, but some of them kept talking. They knew the battle plan.

> One of my former NCOICs [noncommissioned officer in charge] from Da Nang was there. I looked at him and mouthed, "Where are we going?" He had a peculiar grin on his face: "I know where we are going, and you don't; but are you going to be surprised!"
>
> He then proceeded to smooth out my pillow, and on it he drew a small circle and then another circle around that and another circle around that, and pointed his finger right smack dab in the middle. He was drawing a target, and he put his finger in the centermost circle, meaning the bull's eye. Bull's Eye was the code name for Hanoi! "You say what? We are going to Hanoi?" The shock registered on our four faces, saying, "Hanoi? Hanoi?!! No way would anybody in his right mind be going to Hanoi! What the hell for?!!" He wrote on the pillow: POW.
>
> My God! What a feeling! I can't describe it. Other than being CHOSEN—the chosen few—to do something like that! All initial fear when he signaled "Bull's Eye"—of going up there in that god-forsaken, insane place where one cannot penetrate its air defenses—was suddenly cast aside. Here we are going after our people! For years we had heard about the atrocities carried out on the POWs. Well, then we resumed "normal" conversation and didn't say any more about it. We four were still in shock and elation, and the other pararescuemen were all crowded into that very small room enjoying, much to their delight, our reactions.[19]

The PJs, like the other Southeast Asia based participants (C-130 tanker, F-4 MIGCAP, and F-105 Wild Weasel crews), were volunteers who were not given the opportunity to opt out of the operation. Their participation was viewed as a normal wartime assignment for which they volunteered without asking for details. Their respective planners were the only ones who knew what their mission was all about. The F-4 and F-105 crews were informed in their final briefing that they would be providing protection for another operation just west of Hanoi that would involve helicopters and conventional fighter aircraft. Nothing was divulged to them about the POW rescue mission. Because these crews were familiar with Southeast Asia rescue operations, some of them concluded correctly that they would be supporting a POW rescue attempt. Those who did not deduce it learned the truth about their mission after they returned to Udorn.

The stateside trained crews, including the Army Special Forces, were on temporary duty orders to project Ivory Coast. The College Eye crews

were on SEAOR-62 orders. All temporary duty crew members were given the opportunity to opt out on the day of the mission. No one took advantage of this last opportunity. The trained and equally qualified spare crew members were greatly disappointed.

Navy Planning for the Diversion

Navy planning for the diversion began aboard the USS *America* while she was departing from Yankee Station. This aircraft carrier completed her scheduled rotation at Yankee Station on 8 November and began the long return to Norfolk, Virginia. It stopped at Subic Bay in the Philippines, and Bardshar's entire staff went ashore. They were to wait there for the arrival of Bardshar's new flagship, the USS *Kitty Hawk.* When Capt. "Boot" Hill joined them after his return from Washington, D.C., he was immediately put in charge of planning, with direct assistance from P. D. Hoskins. They assembled a team of ten planners that included specialists in surface operations, air operations, communications, combat information center operations, and other combat operations fields. They did their planning in the Fleet Intelligence Center, Pacific Facility. They made arrangements for the USS *Hancock* and the USS *Ranger* to be on line to participate in a credible diversion ordered by Bardshar.[20] *Hancock*'s scheduled arrival at Yankee Station was no problem; *Ranger*'s arrival had to be moved up by shortening her normal stay at Subic Bay. The USS *Ranger* would stop there just long enough to pick up critical supplies at the docks and then continue westward with orders not to submit move reps about her departure for Yankee Station. Move reps would alert others that the USS *Ranger* was urgently needed in the Gulf for some operational reason. Only those who were there to observe it would note *Ranger*'s early departure from Subic Bay (see appendix table 5, which lists the principal Navy planners).

None of the planners assembled by P. D. Hoskins knew the purpose of the diversion. Nevertheless they prepared an elaborate plan for a mock attack against Haiphong that would confuse the North Vietnamese air defenses long enough to permit the Air Force to conduct a highly classified operation somewhere west of Hanoi. They knew this much because the plan they produced made specific references to Air Force support aircraft that would be sharing their airspace over the Gulf of Tonkin. Also, the Navy aircraft were supposed to limit their operations to airspace east of

106–10 degrees east longitude. There was no mention in their plan about a ground operation that would be conducted by Army Green Berets. Planners were puzzled and disappointed by restrictions on ordnance that their attack aircraft would be allowed to carry. Instead of bombs, the attack aircraft would be delivering a large number of flares and chaff. Only four A-7s from the USS *Ranger* would be armed with Rockeye cluster bombs and 20-mm cannon ammunition. Their specific task was to provide air-to-ground fire support for a helicopter rescue attempt if someone got shot down. All combat air patrol aircraft would be armed with proper ordnance to combat enemy interceptors. Just before the actual mission launch, Bardshar authorized installation of Shrike radar homing missiles for use by six A-7 Iron Hand aircraft against surface-to-air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft artillery (AAA) radars. Navy planners did not know this, but the Air Force would be employing the same Shrike air-to-surface missiles on board five F-105 Wild Weasel aircraft that would perform the similar task of SAM and AAA suppression in the west.

There was no need to have a close planning coordination with the Navy. Manor, Simons, and Campbell visited Bardshar and gave him a clear picture of what was required. The Navy diversion would be a completely separate operation, well to the east of the Army and Air Force raid in the west. Those of us at Takhli did not know how many aircraft the diversion would require. The level of their activity over Haiphong was entirely up to Bardshar. It turned out that participation in the raid was the best thing to come along for the Navy since the bombing pause that had been in effect since 31 October 1968. Finally, even though bombs were still prohibited, Bardshar's airmen would be able to put on a harassing show of force against the enemy.

The Naval diversion was to begin before the raiding force entered the airspace where it could be picked up by enemy radars. H-hour, the time for the flare drop over Son Tay compound that had been communicated to the Navy, would occur between 2:15 and 2:20 A.M. local time. Because the assault helicopter formation had to fly at a fixed 105-knot indicated airspeed, the lead Combat Talon C-130 could not control its arrival by making en route speed adjustments. The arrival at the camp would depend on its in-flight winds. The no-wind time from Udorn to Son Tay at 105 knots was calculated at three hours and one minute. With takeoff from Udorn at 11:17 P.M. the assault formation would reach Son Tay at 2:18 A.M. Planners for the USAF supporting aircraft used this time with the understanding that the prevailing wind could influence the actual arrival

time. Navy diversionary aircraft were to use a fixed 2:00 A.M. local time for their H-hour. (The "H" represents the H time zone, which is the local time for Hanoi.) This was fifteen to twenty minutes ahead of our floating H-hour over Son Tay. Their first wave of aircraft would reach designated attack stations at 1:30 A.M. and begin flare drops at 1:52 A.M. This timing assured us that the North Vietnamese defenses would be well focused on the eastern horizon while the Air Force raid formations and jet fighters made their way to the target area from the west.

As "Boot" Hill related more than thirty years later, Bardshar encouraged them to orchestrate a very credible diversion from three carriers that would shake up the North Vietnamese, who had enjoyed immunity from bombing north of the 19th parallel. The mock attack plan turned out to be the largest nighttime naval operation of the Vietnam War, one that excited even the Chinese at whose doorstep it took place. It was much bigger and more convincing than the diversion anticipated by the Air Force planners. We had hoped to see the Navy launch about the same size fighter force that we planned to launch from Thailand. We all underestimated TF 77's resolve to contribute to the POW rescue effort.

The size of the diversion evolved naturally from Bardshar's desire to have a convincing show of force. His planners designed a three-track attack. One attack track of six A-7s would fly north of Haiphong, skirting the prohibited Chinese buffer zone. The second track of eight A-7s would cover the islands east of the city. The third track of eight A-6s would simulate mining of the city's harbor. These twenty-two attack aircraft required target combat air patrol (TARCAP) and MIGCAP flown by six F-4s. Six A-7 Iron Hand aircraft were needed to provide protection from SAM and AAA radars that would target the growing number of aircraft off the coast of North Vietnam. Thirteen refueling tankers would be needed. Six of these, EKA-3Bs, would perform an additional role as electronic countermeasures jamming platforms. Four A-7s would be airborne to provide rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP). Four F-8s would provide force combat air patrol (FORCECAP) to protect the approaches to Yankee Station. Two more F-8s would fly barrier combat air patrol (BARCAP) for the Air Force's Combat Apple RC-135M. Finally, two E-1B radar platforms would provide airborne flight following for all aircraft over the Gulf of Tonkin. The planners had put together a force of fifty-nine aircraft. They came from three carriers: twenty-seven from the USS *Oriskany,* thirty from the USS *Ranger,* and two from the USS *Hancock.*[21] (See appendix table 6 for a list of all participating aircraft and their carriers.)

This diversionary strike would be the last significant mission for *Oriskany,* whose departure date was changed to 29 November. Very clearly, this would be the first nighttime mission for aircrews from *Hancock* and *Ranger* who were coming on line at Yankee Station on 20 and 21 November. "Boot" Hill and his planners were not aware of Blackburn's preoccupation with having fully experienced aircrews fly in the diversion. It was a nonissue at Task Force 77. Newcomers from *Ranger* and *Hancock* were veterans of prior tours at Yankee Station and were ready upon their arrival. "Boot" Hill recalls that *Ranger* had been absent from Yankee Station for only about four months before returning with many of the same people on board. Bardshar had full confidence in the competence of aircrews to undertake this task even on their first mission in the Gulf. So, even though Blackburn would not get his full wish, the operation was in very able hands. Bardshar would have three carriers on line.

Captain Kenyon, Bardshar's chief of staff, had the best answer to aircrew combat readiness concerns, which he expressed almost thirty-two years later:

> Carriers and air wings deploying to the Pacific undergo a thorough operational readiness inspection in the Hawaiian Sea operating area en route to West Pac. Individual pilots, the ones to logically be assigned to participate in the diversionary mission, were second, third and fourth tour returnees to the Gulf of Tonkin. In all probability, this would not have been the first night time mission in the area for aircrews from *Hancock* and *Ranger*[,] the first in some cases for that specific deployment but most probably not the first in their overall experience. The success of their efforts should have alleviated any concern General Blackburn had regarding their individual or collective experience.[22]

Task Force 77 Operations Plan for the Diversion

Bardshar reviewed, signed, and sealed "Boot" Hill's carefully orchestrated operations plan for the diversion. It was a short document that gave clear execution instructions to each participating ship and air squadron without revealing the purpose for the operation. It stressed the need for extreme security and left no doubt that Bardshar himself would be the only one who could authorize news releases about the diversion:

> No public statements regarding this operation are permitted even after its completion, unless specifically authorized by CTF-77 IAW [in accordance with] directives received from higher authority. Additionally, press and other visits to units involved in this operation are to be discouraged whenever possible, provided that such incidents will not lead to unnecessary speculation. Refer all decisions on these matters to CTF-77.
>
> Upon termination of this operation, this OPORD [operations order] will be destroyed. Message report to originator stating that destruction has been accomplished is required.[23]

These are the two closing paragraphs of Bardshar's operations order for the Son Tay raid diversion. The referenced authority, "CTF-77," is Bardshar, the commander of Task Force 77. It explains clearly who was going to control information releases about the operation and that the plan, once executed, had to be destroyed. Manor ignored the last quoted paragraph and kept his Monkey Mountain Command Post copy of the plan for his report, "Commander, JCS Joint Contingency Task Group Report on the Son Tay Prisoner of War Rescue Operation."

The following excerpts from the plan illustrate its flavor:

> a. General. A special operation will be conducted by a Joint Contingency Task Group in the near future. It will be supported by elements of TF-77 whose function is to create a diversion in order to assist in the successful execution of the basic mission. Security considerations prohibit full disclosure of the exact nature and timing of the operation. However, the guidelines listed herein are sufficient for you to perform your assigned function. Should any questions arise concerning the conduct of this operation, they will be directed to me personally by courier whenever possible. Electrical transmissions of messages concerning this operation are discouraged.
>
> b. Background. Experience has shown that a large naval air attack in the Haiphong and northeastern NVN [North Vietnam] area can confuse and saturate the enemy's air defense organization and draw MIGs in a defensive reaction to the apparent attack.
>
> c. Concept of Operations. The primary purpose of this operation is diversion. It is therefore doubtful that political considerations will permit the expenditure of air-to-ground ordnance other than flares. Within these limits, the objective is to create as much confusion

in the NVN Command and Control System as possible. In order to accomplish this objective, the Navy effort will consist of two waves of approximately fifteen strike aircraft, each wave conducting simulated missions over NVN while other Task Force 77 aircraft are positioned for force defense, EW support, and in-flight refueling as required.

. . .

1. Rules of Engagement. The following rules of engagement are in effect once forces have actually been committed in support of this operation and until it has been terminated or cancelled.

(1) Any aircraft over NVN or the GOT [Gulf of Tonkin] attacking or acting in a manner which indicates with reasonable certainty an intent to attack friendly forces in this operation will be engaged. All detected tracks over NVN North of 20N which meet these criteria will be classified as "confirmed hostile." Current rules of engagement will apply for those air contacts detected south of 20N.

(2) No pursuit is authorized into the territorial seas or airspace of Communist China.

(3) USN aircraft. CAP or Strike will under no circumstances proceed west of 106–10E when north of 20–00N.

(4) No air to ground ordnance is authorized with the exception of the flares carried by Strike aircraft and the Rockeyes/Guns carried aboard RESCAP. (Later modified to permit firing of Shrikes at SAM and AAA radars.)

. . .

m. Command and Signal.

(1) Commander, Joint Contingency Task Group, under the operational command of CINCPAC, and located at Monkey Mountain, has overall authority for the conduct of this operation.

(2) CTG 77.00 is CCD-7 in USS Oriskany.

(3) CTF 77 located in USS Oriskany will exercise overriding authority for the conduct of the Navy diversionary effort as directed by the CJCTG.

. . .

n. Administration and Special Instructions.

(1) Once this plan is opened by the designated addressees, disclosure of such portions as necessary to accomplish your assigned mission is authorized. Such disclosure will be restricted to those with an

absolute need to know and will be accomplished as late as possible in order to minimize the chances of compromise. Once this plan has been opened, no personal mail will leave your unit and personnel will be transferred only in emergency cases until the operation has been terminated or cancelled.

. . .

(4) USAF aircraft will be operating in the Gulf of Tonkin and over NVN during this time frame. Air Force aircraft over the Gulf of Tonkin will consist of the Luzon RR relay, Combat Apple, a KC-135 tanker, and two College Eye EC-121 aircraft in the vicinity of 19–30N/106–40E. Additionally, USN aircraft will have IFF on at all times. Therefore an inoperable IFF is cause for aircraft abort.[24]

Return to Yankee Station

Manor and his staff were not aware that Bardshar had gone to the Naval Air Station (NAS) at Cubi Point in the Philippines. They assumed that he remained at Yankee Station aboard the USS *Oriskany,* which became the only remaining carrier in the war zone after the departure of the USS *America.* The USS *Oriskany* was R. Adm. James D. ("Jig-Dog") Ramage's flagship. He assumed command of TF 77 while Bardshar was ashore in the Philippines. By the time the planning for the diversion was completed, two new carriers, the USS *Hancock* and the USS *Ranger,* were headed for the Gulf of Tonkin. It was time for Bardshar to return to Yankee Station and prepare his task force for the diversionary attack against Haiphong.

Bardshar and a few members of his staff were ready to depart from Cubi Point NAS early on Thursday morning, 19 November, when they received Manor's coded message that the POW rescue mission had received approval from Washington. All was cleared for the launch from Thailand on the night of 21 November and from Yankee Station just after midnight on 22 November. Bardshar's entourage flew to the USS *Oriskany* in a C-2A carrier on-board delivery (COD), and the ship's deck log shows them arriving at 12:39 P.M., recording that "Commander Attack Carrier Striking Force Seventh Fleet, VADM Bardshar, USN broke his flag in this ship."[25]

Completely surprised, "Jig-Dog" Ramage remembers well what followed:

During 1970, as Commander Carrier Task Group 77.0, I was in tactical command of strike operations from Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. VADM Fred Bardshar, Commander Striking Force Seventh Fleet (CTF-77), was not in the Gulf. When he landed aboard USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34) in a C-2 COD originating from NAS Cubi Point, Philippines, he immediately followed me down to my cabin accompanied by his operations officer, CAPT Allen "Boot" Hill, and his intelligence officer, CDR P. D. Hoskins. I hadn't the slightest idea why ADM Bardshar was on board, but I knew that whatever he had on his mind had to be of extreme importance. After he closed the door, he began by saying that what he was about to tell me was so highly classified that it had to be passed to me in person. There was to be no electronic communication on the subject. He continued: "We are going to cover an attempt to rescue some prisoners in North Vietnam." I was elated. We really hadn't done much in the North since President Johnson had placed the northern and most vital parts of NVN off limits in 1968. All I could comment was, "It's about time!" Fred then said that the raid was to take place after midnight on 22nd of November. Task Force 77's job was to operate aircraft east of Hanoi, mainly around Haiphong[,] to keep the attention focused to the east and draw off any enemy reaction to the prisoner recovery operations in the Son Tay area. We would have authority to return fire against enemy opposition—another bit of good news.

Fred then added, "Unfortunately, this operation is so highly classified that you can't tell your aircrews what it's all about." I responded, "What kind of nut do you think the pilots would take me for when I order about a hundred planes out at night without giving them a good reason?" Fred then said that he understood my position clearly, and that I could use my own judgment—which I did. I then pointed out that since he was senior and on station that perhaps he might want to take tactical command. Bardshar said, "No, it's your show, run it."[26]

Command and Control

Very important and perhaps the most complex pre-raid arrangements had to be made at the Tactical Air Control Center–North Sector at Monkey Mountain outside of Da Nang. This is where Brigadier General Manor

was going to monitor the progress of the raid, issue any appropriate commands to the participants, and maintain contact with the National Military Command Center in Washington. The commander of the center promised to put his best qualified people on duty that night and to devote the entire facility to Manor for as long as he had the command and control of all aircraft in his sector.

Because the raid was under the direct operational control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an unprecedented communication link with the National Military Command Center through CINCPAC in Hawaii had to be established for this occasion. We anticipated some potential communication problems between the raiding forces and various airborne aircraft that would either relay our transmissions or provide data for situational displays in the command center. Each possible channel of communication needed a suitable backup. For obvious security reasons there was no way to test these uniquely assembled command and control link-ups. Manor would have to rely on radio communications and data transmission links that would be operational at the time of the raid's execution.

We relied heavily on the two College Eye airborne radar platforms to provide coverage for the low-level aircraft at Son Tay. Radar coverage for high-level aircraft would come from several other sources. We had one ground-based radar at Udorn that would feed data on air activity from the west. From the east we had one ground-based radar at Monkey Mountain and one seaborne radar aboard the Navy's air traffic control ship *Red Crown* in the Gulf of Tonkin. Consequently, Manor would have the capability to monitor radar data from ground-based, airborne, and seaborne radars. The Navy's *Red Crown* also had the ability to monitor MIG activity, furnish MIG warnings, and provide friendly fighters with vectors so that they could intercept hostile aircraft. In addition, the Navy would fly its E-1B aircraft that performed essentially the same functions as the EC-121Ts for the Air Force.

The Tactical Air Control Center–North Sector was linked with the Navy's tactical data system and would be receiving real-time displays of all aerial activity within the *Red Crown*'s coverage. The Air Force's newly modified EC-121Ts were supposed to provide the same type of real-time downloading of data to the command center for the first time ever. This was the principal reason for the aircraft's modification.

The Air Force RC-135M Combat Apple from Kadena AB, Okinawa, had the ability to monitor and relay ultra high frequency (UHF) and frequency modulated (FM) communications. It was linked directly to the

command center at Monkey Mountain. If necessary, Combat Apple could be used as a backup for the center if its command post became inoperative. The airborne mission coordinator received a Son Tay raid briefing and understood that there would be a lot of Air Force and Naval activity in his area on the night of the raid. Colonel Frisbie, Brigadier General Manor's backup, would be on board the primary Combat Apple.

Colonel Frisbie recorded the following in his memoirs:

> My job was to fly with an intelligence gathering aircraft—circling over the ocean next to Vietnam—called "Combat Apple." This plane was loaded with radio and sharp looking USAF airmen of oriental parentage who could interpret the enemies' radio conversations. They received every transmission made by the enemy over their radios. They could tell by listening to radio contact if any Vietnamese aircraft were in the area. I was to receive a radio coded two-word message from our C-130 when our force arrived over the North Vietnam border on the way to the camp. Then I was to relay that to a Communications Center in South Vietnam where General Manor was monitoring the operation.[27]

In addition to the Combat Apple there was another Strategic Air Command RC-135 around-the-clock radio relay aircraft from U-Tapao that orbited over the Gulf of Tonkin. Manor secured its services for the duration of our operation. This aircraft's normal capability would be beefed up by installation of additional equipment that would permit monitoring of four more ultra high frequency channels used by the Army Special Forces.

Finally, there was our Combat Talon Cherry Two that would orbit within the line of sight of Son Tay until all participating aircraft cleared the area. Cherry Two would monitor and record all frequencies used by the raiders and, if needed, relay information to Brigadier General Manor via high frequency/single side band radios (HF/SSB).

It was a complicated communications web with numerous participants. It was the best arrangement that could have been engineered with the resources available at that time.

We would not have a direct link to the 7th Air Force Command Center in Saigon. Surely, Brigadier General Cramer would brief the officer in charge of the midnight shift about our TOP SECRET and no-paper-trail incursion into the forbidden Hanoi-Haiphong air space. This would avoid unnecessary panic by the center's controllers. For his part, Cramer did not inform us that massive bombing of targets south of the 19th parallel, al-

ready planned and now known as the retaliatory Operation Freedom Bait, would kick of on the morning of 21 November. The center's controllers would be well aware of those air strikes.

Surprises

Because we did not have close enough contact with the Army Special Forces to learn about their day-to-day tweaking of attack plans, we assumed that Simons was going to be at Manor's side at Monkey Mountain during the raid. We were surprised when we learned at Takhli that he was going in on Apple One as a command backup for Sydnor without diminishing his role as the overall ground commander. Apparently that was his intention all along. We just assumed that he would not be a part of the raiding force because he did not participate in all training sessions. When he did participate, he was there as a trainer and evaluator. We were also not aware that "Doc" Cataldo was going in with the raiding party. We anticipated his role as a greeter of freed POWs and any battle casualties after the return to Udorn.

The next surprise was when Manor chose Lt. Col. Cecil Clark to accompany him to the command post. This proved to be a great moment for Capt. David M. Kender, who had been flying with the Pope AFB crew as a spare EWO. Just like that he became Cecil's replacement. Cecil was the best person from the Eglin planning group Manor could have picked to take with him to the command post. Cecil was in on every single planning debate and decision that took place in the planning conference room. He was a rich storehouse of information. He knew about many "what if" contingencies that were either practiced or discussed with the crews. He also knew the C-130 aircraft commanders and their crews from assignments at Nha Trang in Vietnam and at Pope AFB. He knew what could be expected of them if things did not go as planned. All who had worked with him conceded that Manor had made a very good choice.

The other planners who accompanied Brigadier General Manor to the Monkey Mountain Control Center were Lt. Col. Homer Willett, our expert on radar and ground control intercept; Lt. Col. James V. Bailey, radio communication specialist; Maj. Keith Grimes, weatherman; Maj. Jim Morris, who had intimate knowledge of ground operations; Maj. Max Newman, agent for security and counterintelligence; and Capt. John Knops, whose expertise was intelligence on the enemy air order of battle.

Our last but somewhat anticipated surprise was to learn that Lt. Col. Herbert R. Zehnder, alternate copilot of HH-3 Banana, would replace Maj. David E. Vaughan. We did not see much of Zehnder and did not know him but we were impressed by his reputation. He was credited with having saved more than eighty lives during his prior Southeast Asia tours and had set an HH-3 helicopter nonstop long-distance record between New York and Paris during the French city's 1967 air show. We knew that Britton was not successful in getting him to volunteer for the Ivory Coast project because he could not be included on the secret of our mission's purpose. He joined our task force late, and Vaughan flew most of the training missions as Kalen's copilot at Eglin. Because of that, some of us assumed that the loss of his spot to Zehnder was due to an injury he sustained just before our deployment to Thailand. This is how David Vaughan described that event:

> Herb Kalen and I and two others were playing paddleball to work out some of the tension. Herb whacked me with his racquet, across my nose and eye. I went to the Flight Surgeon and had him put a butterfly bandage on the large cut, rather than stitches, which would have involved sedatives. My nose wound up broken, but it had been broken before, so cosmetically it wasn't a big deal. I didn't want to be grounded. Shortly after that I got called into Britton's office and was told I was to be replaced.[28]

The decision to have Zehnder fly the mission was Britton's. He obviously felt that his forty-six-year-old friend had more experience than the young major from Da Nang. So David Vaughan ended up monitoring the raid beside Ben Kraljev in the alternate Tactical Air Control Center at Udorn.

Ready to Go!

All our in-theater planning and coordination worked out flawlessly because the officers who were in charge did not overlook a single detail in preparing the supporting units for their roles in the raid. It is remarkable how much planning and coordination was accomplished in a very short time and how many more aircraft had to be added to the thirteen that flew in the Assault and Strike Formations.

] CHAPTER FOUR [

The Son Tay Mission

It was the rescue mission that will trouble the minds of the raiders for the rest of our lives. We embarked upon it with such high expectations. We hoped to become heralded heroes of a protracted war that was beginning to wear down the nation's patience. Surely we could reverse this trend by bringing home some of our imprisoned colleagues, who had never given up on their soldierly duties and had not stopped resisting the enemy.

Final Mission Preparations

Our secure building at Takhli became overcrowded once the planners from the theater supporting units began arriving. We had to limit the visits of Eglin-trained crews to required work on personal navigational charts and mission documents. Capt. Tom Stiles and I were exceptions. Just as we had briefed visitors at Eglin on air operations, we continued to do so with each new group of planners. Tom provided the narrative part and I pointed out appropriate locations on easel-mounted charts and on the three-dimensional plastic relief maps that were spliced together on one table. Both of us answered questions as they came up. After each briefing we provided the newly initiated planners with appropriate charts and assisted them in any way we could with whatever supplies and mission information they needed.

Two HC-130P tanker crews (from Lime One and Two) remained with us at Takhli until the night we launched the mission. They had to do all their planning in our secure building. The F-4, F-105, EC-121, and KC-135 representatives coordinated their preliminary flight plans and charts with us and then fine-tuned the rest with their respective crews at their home bases.

The Pope AFB crew members were disappointed when the Ramstein crew was selected to fly in Cherry One. We always knew that this could happen, but our spirits were dampened and each one of the twelve crew

members wondered why we did not get picked for the coveted helicopter formation escort. I think that I had the most satisfying rationalization for our crew assignment. As Cherry Two radar navigator, I had a more challenging task than my counterpart Capt. Tom Eckhart in Cherry One. His primary concern would be to keep the helicopter formation as close to the center of the track as possible and to direct his aircraft to rejoin the helicopter formation in case of a breakup. He did not have to worry about time lost or gained due to the winds or formation breakups. It would be my responsibility to adjust our en route progress to correspond to Cherry One's and be ready to shift formation leads if something affected their ability to lead the helicopters. That time management would require me to track their progress on my chart. I would have to be aware of where they were within one to two miles of their flight-planned track based on time adjustments they reported at pre-designated turning points. I inherited this responsibility because as the radar navigator I had the largest desk space, with room for several charts, logs, and all necessary navigational tools. I maintained the in-flight log and controlled most of the navigational instruments. I updated the Doppler with course and distance to go and cross-track counter settings. The FLIR navigator had a very small table without access to Doppler and radar. The map-reading navigator did not have any workspace. He stood behind the copilot and held his carefully folded chart in one hand and Aldus light in the other. Consequently, I remained convinced that my work as the radar navigator of Cherry Two demanded more navigational skills than that of my counterpart in Cherry One.

Some of our crew members consoled themselves with the belief that we were better qualified to conduct a possible Fulton recovery rescue than the Ramstein crew. This was true because we had trained much more extensively in Fulton recoveries at Pope AFB than had our counterparts in Germany. This type of rescue was one of the tasks assigned to Cherry Two.

Weather had been a major potential problem for our carefully orchestrated raid. All indications were that Typhoon Patsy could place our planned mission execution on the morning of 22 November in serious jeopardy. This typhoon was moving in from the east, casting serious doubts on the Navy's ability to execute the diversion as planned on the target date. Patsy was already ravaging the Philippines. The Associated Press reported it to be the strongest typhoon to hit the islands in a century, with peak winds in Manila ranging from 93 to 124 miles an hour.[1]

This development troubled Manor. Patsy would soon be moving over the Gulf of Tonkin and most certainly would jeopardize planned TF 77 operations. At 4:11 P.M. on 19 November, he notified the National Military Command Center in Washington, McCain in Hawaii, and Bardshar at Yankee Station that a five-day mission delay due to weather was possible.[2]

A delay of five days had many security implications. We were no longer confined to a small geographic space as we were in Florida, where the counterintelligence types could monitor our activities. Too many people from several bases had just been given too many of our mission details. Our support aircrews, especially those who had been involved in planning, were grounded. They could not fly any of their unit missions until they completed our POW rescue. The last thing we needed was to have one of them shot down and captured. Everyone was ready to go. A long delay would increase the chances for a compromise.

Holding off the launch of specially configured aircraft for five or more days at Nakhon Phanom and Udorn could create problems. Wing commanders there had to prepare aircraft to be flown by unknown crews. They would not be privileged to learn about the mission they were supporting until after their aircraft returned. One can imagine what went through their minds when they ordered their men to prepare requested aircraft and equipment for unfamiliar crews that would arrive on a C-130 just in time for takeoff. Their ground crews would get an additional surprise when half the pilots who showed up to fly the A-1Es and HH-53s were their own people who had been on TDY in Florida for a long time.

Some maintenance airmen who had to prepare aircraft for the rescue mission had problems with what they were tasked to do. A well-meaning young sergeant at Udorn caused undue attention to the stripping down of nonessential equipment from the two HH-3Es that came from Da Nang to fly as Banana. Apparently he took time to review the maintenance history of the two helicopters and found out that both had recently undergone a major IRAN (inspection and repair as necessary) because they were readied for a transfer to Okinawa. These were the last two HH-3Es left in the war zone. All others were either combat losses or had been replaced by the larger Super Jolly Green Giant HH-53s. He did not like the way our people were removing nonessential equipment from these helicopters. He ran to his supervisor and lamented that men were not stripping but carelessly gutting the two helicopters to the point where it would be difficult to make them operationally acceptable again. His supervisor had no idea

why the directed removal of equipment was necessary. Nevertheless, he succeeded in calming down his conscientious aircraft mechanic.

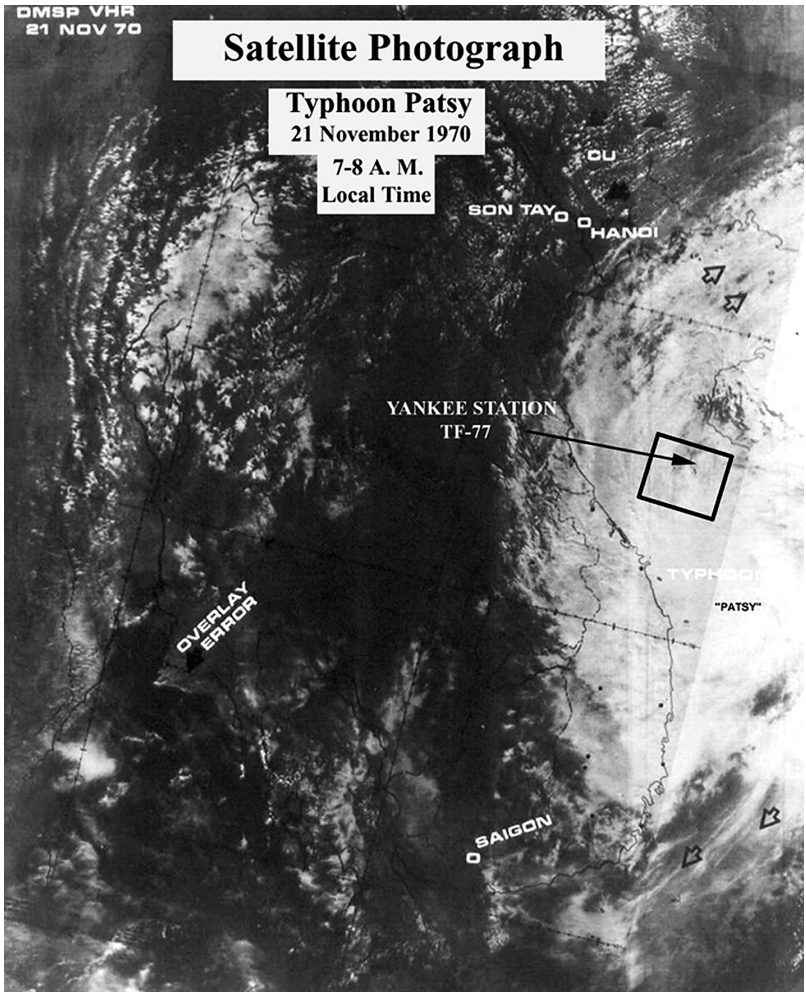
Another problem came up at the Korat Officers' Club after the mission time was firmed up. One diligent maintenance officer, who was in charge of weapons loading, approached Lieutenant Colonel Kronebusch and called attention to everyone within hearing distance that his F-105s were not properly armed for their mission. He was not aware of Kronebusch's special nighttime mission but must have been in on the details of Operation Freedom Bait, which was to unfold early in the morning on the day after our raid. He had to be ushered out of the club before others became interested in what he was complaining about.

Brigadier General Manor could not postpone his critical weather decision to delay our raid for five days or launch one day early. He had the ultimate authority and had to make a decisive commitment. After consulting with Grimes and his weather experts, he concluded that Saturday night, 21 November, did not look good. The raid had to be launched one day early, on Friday, 20 November. This schedule change would not create a problem for the aircrews and the ground troops. We were all ready. All we needed was proper rest for that night's rescue mission. Colonel Frisbie and his three companions who were to fly in the Combat Apples had to make a hasty departure in a T-39 to meet their scheduled takeoffs from Okinawa. We assembled all crew members for our final briefing and then dispersed to crew rest. Manor sent a preliminary early "go" message to Bardshar in the Gulf of Tonkin at 10:10 A.M. We did not anticipate any problems in getting the Navy on board with this schedule change. All their assets were confined to a small area within Yankee Station, whereas ours were spread out on bases stretching from Japan to Thailand. We also did not see a problem with our ground troops, who arrived early in the morning on 18 November. They were also ready. They were confined in a controlled environment inside the CIA compound where they followed a well-established daily routine. It was late in the morning and they were sent to bed, with "Doc" Cataldo dispensing sleeping pills to anyone who needed them.

To confirm that the air mass movement influenced by the approaching Typhoon Patsy was indeed occurring, Manor arranged for a special late afternoon RF-4 weather reconnaissance flight to scout the area over Laos. This flight confirmed that the earlier weather briefing by Van Houdt was correct. Consequently, at 3:56 P.M. (at 3:56 A.M. on Friday morning in Washington), Manor notified Blackburn in the Pentagon and McCain in Hawaii that he was advancing the rescue mission by twenty-four hours.

Thirty minutes later he sent the final "go" message to Bardshar in the Gulf of Tonkin.[3]

The now declassified satellite photographs taken on 21 November show that while the approach to Son Tay had good weather, the Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin would have been out of action.



Typhoon Patsy, as photographed by a then-secret weather satellite from an altitude of 450 miles. This revealing photo shows very clearly that the U.S. Navy's participation in the raid would not have been possible on the scheduled date of 21 November. (USAF photo, courtesy of Hank Brandli, with overprint by John Gargus)

The Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin

Capt. "Boot" Hill had a busy day after his arrival at Yankee Station. He flew in a helicopter from one carrier to another and briefed more than a dozen quickly assembled key staff officers about the unusual mission they would be flying on the night of 21–22 November. On the USS *Oriskany* he briefed the skipper, Capt. Frank S. Haak, and the leader of Carrier Air Group 19, Cdr. Douglas F. Mow, along with several squadron commanders and selected staff members. On the USS *Ranger* he did the same for its skipper, Capt. J. L. Coleman, and the commander of Carrier Air Wing 2, Capt. J. E. Knight. On the USS *Hancock* it was Capt. T. C. Johnson and Capt. Gary H. Palmer, the commander of Carrier Air Wing 21. These seasoned combat pilots were puzzled by the strange mission ahead of them but sensed that it was something very significant. Now on the morning of 20 November they got the news that Hill's mission would be flown twenty-four hours early because of the weather.

Vice Admiral Bardshar forbade all those who received Hill's briefing on the diversion to fly on any kind of mission until the diversion operation had ended. This was in spite of the fact that none of the commanders involved knew what the diversion was for. Retired R. Adm. Bruce Boland, who in 1970 commanded the VF-24 squadron on the *Hancock,* remembers Hill's briefing, which he attended with Captain Palmer: "I recall that he told us that he could not say why we were doing this operation but when it was over we would all be proud of being involved in it. He was right!!!"[4]

Hill's briefing of key staff members of the USS *Ranger* was enough to explain why they had to cut short their stay at Subic Bay and rush to the Gulf of Tonkin ahead of their scheduled on-line time. It also answered the question of why the scheduled departure of the USS *Oriskany* was being delayed until 29 November. This sudden change disappointed many. Lt. Russell Clayton York, operations scheduling officer of VA-155, recalls that many Navy wives at Alameda NAS, California, *Oriskany*'s home port, held off-the-line parties on 20 November to celebrate the end of their husbands' tours in the war zone.[5]

Carrier skippers and flying unit commanders were not the only ones who needed to be notified in person about the mission that would unfold that night. There were several support ships that needed to participate.

One of these was the USS *Wainwright,* which had just arrived on station from its prior mission off the coast of Korea. *Wainwright*'s assistant communications officer, Ens. Michael W. Anglin, relates the following account in his memoirs:

> I think it was only a few hours after we had arrived at our position in the northern Gulf of Tonkin when the ship was visited by a high-ranking staff officer of the Task Force 77 Commander. He came on board, I think via helicopter, and he and Captain Vining went directly to the Captain's cabin and talked for about 20 minutes. He then left.
>
> That evening at 7:00 o'clock, just before the movies started up in the Wardroom and on the mess deck, the X.O. came over the loudspeaker. "Gentlemen, this is the Executive Officer. Tonight the *Wainwright* will be engaged in operations anticipated to evoke a hostile response from the North Vietnamese. We will go to General Quarters at midnight. That is all."
>
> Needless to say, the movies never got watched. Everyone quietly disappeared to their work or bunking areas and started really checking those life vest light batteries. For all we knew, the President had decided to reinstate the bombing of North Vietnam and we had shown up just in time to get in on the opening strike.
>
> We were at General Quarters all night, waiting for the counterattack that never came. The bombers from our carriers launched on schedule, flew north to our position in groups of 6 and 8, checked in with our controllers, and headed for North Vietnam.[6]

The USS *Wainwright* was a sophisticated, technologically up-to-date floating air traffic control facility of the Vietnam War era that had the ability to control and direct air combat operations. She was a cruiser armed with Terrier missiles and served as a PIRAZ ship (acronym for Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone). She was linked with other ships through the Naval Tactical Data System (NTDS), which provided their Combat Information Centers with real-time displays of covered airspace. The PIRAZ ship's basic function was to provide positive identification and tracking of any aircraft within her radar coverage area and from space when tied in by airborne surveillance radars on E-1Bs. More than a dozen radar operators with computer consoles could maintain around-the-clock vigilance and provide needed advisories to as many as 150 aircraft. These

could vary from normal flight following to attack warnings and vectoring of friendly fighters for intercepting and destroying enemy aircraft. They could assist aircraft by steering them to tankers for airborne refueling and provide vital inputs for the rescue of downed crew members. Any ship equipped with an NTDS could selectively monitor any activity in real time while it was happening with updates from each new sweep of *Wainwright*'s radar antenna.

Newly arrived radar controllers would earn their pay that night. During a period of more than two hours they would track unprecedented numbers of blacked-out and radio-silenced Navy and Air Force aircraft that would fly multiple tracks overland north of Haiphong and over the Gulf of Tonkin. Their tracks would have time and altitude separations, but they would cross over each other in various congested locations. Radar controllers would have to be alert to monitor them across their scopes and pay close attention to coded altitude data squawked by each aircraft's IFF transmitter.

There would also be significant congestion during aircraft launches and recoveries. Each carrier needed air traffic control services equal to a relatively busy mainland airport. That night there would be three such airports within a one-degree square box that comprised Yankee Station. (At the 19th parallel one degree of longitude measures 60 nautical miles, and one degree of latitude is 56.5 nautical miles.) Obviously, the maneuverable airspaces of carriers would overlap and vary with their changing locations relative to each other. They would be moving within Yankee Station, sailing into the wind at about 15 nautical miles per hour during both launches and recoveries of their aircraft. Once all of the aircraft were off their decks, they would have to turn around so that they could sail into the wind again when their aircraft returned to their decks. That would be a lot of carrier and aircraft movement confined to a small geographical space. Furthermore, each carrier had a flotilla of supporting ships that would also be on the move. All would have to participate in a carefully choreographed water ballet taking place inside of a 60-square-mile box.

Crew Rest

I was not at all sleepy. I took an aimless walk around the base and reviewed various mission details in my mind. I came upon a break in the

base fence that led into a cluster of shops where Thai vendors were eager to dispose of their merchandise. They were encouraged by our presence and the increase in air traffic at the base whose prior U.S. occupants had already abandoned it. I did not buy anything in spite of terrific discounts everyone offered me. I made up my mind to come back on Saturday after the mission. That diversion took my mind off the mission and also took more than one hour off the clock.

I went back to my trailer, but I still could not sleep. I would lie still, but my mind raced from one mission event to another. I got up several times to write myself short notes about things I needed to do with my charts once I picked them up before the flight. I still remember one of those things. I needed to annotate my chart with estimated times of arrival of the Assault Formation at each turning point so that I could have a quicker reference for their ahead or behind progress in minutes.

My most bothersome thoughts concerned the most improbable mission event: getting captured after an emergency landing somewhere in the target area. I was convinced that there was a very small chance for that scenario. We would have the advantage of surprise and be out of small arms threat range before the enemy could become fully alerted to our brief over-flight intrusion. Then, once in our orbit west of the Black and Red Rivers, we would be out of SAM and AAA range and too low for a successful nighttime ground-controlled MIG intercept. The only way we could get exposed to small arms fire would be during a possible Fulton recovery of downed crew members. Even then a nighttime Fulton pick-up would be safer than one attempted in the daytime. North Vietnamese soldiers would neither expect nor be likely to see the inflated balloon. Our gray, cloud-like camouflaged aircraft's underside would not catch their eyes until the sound of four engines alerted them that we had just passed over them. Furthermore, such a rescue would depend on orders from Brigadier General Manor, and it would have to be carried out very expeditiously because of our diminishing fuel supply. Perhaps Cherry One would be ordered to refuel at Udorn and return to replace us in the target area. But by that time the Rescue Control Center at Udorn would have been activated and a new wave of Jolly Greens and Sandys would be on their way to make a standard crew member rescue during daylight hours. Likewise, any one of our Apples that did not have rescued POWs on board could be tasked to locate and pick up anyone downed during the raid.

As all this went through my mind, I always returned to my own per-

sonal concerns with getting captured. My whole immediate family lived in Czechoslovakia. My parents, brother, and sister had experienced years of persecution because they stood accused by that country's communist regime for their "collaboration in my traitorous escape to the USA." My captivity in another communist country would provide a tremendous new opportunity for further exploitation of their lives. During my prior tour in Vietnam, I had resolved that I would never be taken alive. I would provoke my potential captors into shooting it out with me. That made me a poor team member when I flew with an eleven-man crew. My personal reservation about captivity would put anyone else with me in jeopardy. My only rationalization for this scenario was that such an event would never come about. Now I was back in Southeast Asia, this time with a twelve-man crew, and the same daydreaming nightmare kept me awake. No one knew of my concern, and I resolved not to let anyone in on it. Along with this secret, I had a wish to die with a U.S. flag in my possession. During my prior Vietnam tour I carried a nine-by-fifteen-inch flag in my navigator's bag. I would put it in my left breast pocket on our nighttime missions over North Vietnam. In November 1970, though, this flag was at home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, with my unsuspecting wife and four children. (When my American-born mother died in Slovakia in May 2000 I placed this flag in her funeral casket.) Before our departure from Eglin I bought a three-by-five-foot flag that I planned to wrap around my chest under the flight fatigues. Then, if the worst scenario materialized, an American flag would cover at least a part of my body.

I also thought about a tape recording I had made for my wife and children during our stopover at Wake Island. I planned to give it to Capt. Ron Jones so that he could pass it on to my family if I did not make it back home. Ron was our spare pilot, with a very slim chance of flying on the mission. Something very serious would have to happen to one of the Pope or Ramstein pilots for him to gain a crew position.

My attempts to get some sleep were useless. Finally, I got out of bed and made it up neatly just because time was not moving fast enough and it was something for me to do. Then I took a long cooling shower. As I dressed for the flight, I folded my flag lengthwise in half and then again into a nine-inch stripe that I wrapped around my lower chest like a cummerbund. I pulled my T-shirt over it and tucked the bottom in my shorts, thus ensuring that the flag would not slip past my waist. The loose-fitting

jungle fatigue shirt covered me so well that no one could tell that I had something concealed beneath it.

It was already almost 4:00 P.M. I went outside and walked around aimlessly. I paused by the briefing room. A special weather recon F-4 had just returned from a flight over Laos. Brigadier General Manor was getting a confirmation that the weather over our route was shaping up just as it had been predicted by the forecasters. That was very good news.

After another time-wasting walk around the base I watched a beautiful crimson sunset. The sun looked huge and had a clearly defined corona. Smoke-filled air from burning rice fields provided a filter that let me look at it with naked eyes. As it slipped out of sight behind the trees, I wondered how many of us and of the enemy would not see it rise again tomorrow.

I wondered about the same thing a few minutes later in the theater when I witnessed Bull Simons's emotional briefing to the Green Berets. All of them knew that they had been preparing for a rescue effort, but they did not know the target location. At last they would learn the truth from the man whom they volunteered to follow and who drove them so hard during their training in Florida. Once again, Bull's comments would be very brief: "We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war, maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay. This is something American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers. The target is 23 miles west of Hanoi."[7]

Bull's stunning revelation was welcomed with a moment of dead silence that erupted into spontaneous thunderous applause. There were almost eighty men there, and each man was eager to go. But the ground assault plan called for only fifty-six men. Bull gave all of them the opportunity to step out if they had any compelling reasons for not going on such a risky mission. No one opted out, and the adrenalin rush that initially electrified everyone turned into a disappointing letdown for the trained alternates who would not be able to take part in the action. I was standing on the side of the auditorium looking at their faces. I wondered how many of these brave and enthusiastic men would be coming back to Fort Bragg in rubber body bags.

My Cherry Two was already airborne when these brave men boarded the shuttle C-130s for Udorn, where the Jolly Green Giant helicopters waited for their flight to Son Tay. We learned after our return that many alternates suited up and showed up at the departure point hoping that some of the chosen fifty-six would fall out.

The Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain

Walking back to my quarters, I heard the sound of jet aircraft taking off. As I looked up, I recognized the T-39 that was flying Brigadier General Manor and his small staff to Da Nang. Was that the first launch of the raid? Yes, it was. Only the man who was on board that jet could call it off now. I knew that he would not.

Brigadier General Manor and his staff arrived at Monkey Mountain in time to get acquainted with the command post facility. The scene was familiar only to Homer Willett, who had made the arrangements for this occasion and had witnessed many Tactical Air Control Center operations in the past, and to the secretive Capt. Jack Knops, who also must have been in this center before. Time was short, and none of it was wasted during a briefing that explained the command post setup. It was too much to grasp without having seen the center on a prior operation. The center's battle commander assigned one member of his staff to each visitor to assist him in interpreting the tactical air displays. The special crew that was on duty that night was curious to see what kind of air activity would materialize on their shift. Too many days went by with otherwise routine command post activity. This night would be different. A group of Army and Air Force officers headed by an Air Force brigadier general had come to the center to monitor something special. The office grapevine had it that even their center's battle commander had not been briefed on the impending operation. Some of the key people knew that retaliatory strikes under Operation Freedom Bait would begin later on during daylight hours. But this was something that would precede those previously planned air attacks.

Our photo interpreter, Major Andraitis, was once again in Yokota, Japan, to view the freshest high-altitude films of the Son Tay area. His task was to find out if there were any recent changes to the deployment of North Vietnamese air defenses. These would provide him with a clue that the enemy might know about our rescue attempt and would be ready to surprise us with an ambush. He orchestrated a speedy downloading of cameras and films from the high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft before the fuselage cooled down from its descent through the earth's atmosphere. He studied the developed films and six hours before H-hour passed his findings to Colonel Frisbie, who was already in his Combat Apple C-135 orbiting over the Gulf of Tonkin. Colonel Frisbie recalls the following in his memoirs:

> Andraitis noticed an old machine gun bunker right next to the camp on a photo. It was so overgrown that it hadn't been used in years. He figured that if our mission ever leaked out, the North Vietnamese would clean out that old gun placement and make it usable for a machine gun to kill all of our rescue aircraft and Berets. So he cooked up a deal that the day before our mission, an SR 71 would take a picture of the camp and Andraitis would be there when it landed and rush the film to the lab. All he would look for was for that gun emplacement. If it was being cleared out, the mission was cancelled. If the old gun emplacement was still overgrown, it was a "Go!"[8]

Andraitis succeeded in analyzing the fresh high-altitude films and sent out a prearranged report that Frisbie understood. The prison courtyard continued showing recent activity and there were no changes to the defenses around Son Tay. The mission was a "Go"!

Departures from Thailand

The first mission departure from Thailand was the primary EC-121T, Frog One, which took off at 10:00 P.M. from Korat for its orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin, just southeast of Haiphong. Lt. Col. Dewitt H. Barwick was the aircraft commander. Jake Mulherron, the Task Force commander for the new modification, was also on board. Ten minutes later the second aircraft, Frog Two, commanded by Maj. Richard T. Weber, followed to establish a spare orbit in the southern part of the Gulf of Tonkin. No one recalls why they used "Frog" call signs, which did not fit the Fruit Salad theme of the raider aircraft.

Just as Bull Simons did at Takhli, Jake Mulherron gave his men the same opportunity to decline going on that night's mission. This took place during their pre-departure crew briefing. He still did not tell them about the rescue of POWs. All they learned was that they would fly a normal route to their orbit and provide support for an operation that would occur somewhere in North Vietnam. Their mission was a TOP SECRET operation that carried with it higher than normal risks. Not one man opted out. They all became volunteers.

Our takeoff from Takhli in Cherry Two at 1525Z (10:25 P.M. local time) was uneventful. We used Greenwich Mean Time (GMT, or Z time) to record all mission events. This placed the date of the raid on 20 Novem-

ber in the late evening instead of on 21 November in the early morning. (However, all times mentioned hereafter are given in local Hanoi time, the H time zone. Times of all events are from mission logs, transcribed tape recordings from various aircraft, and from Brigadier General Manor's "Report on the Son Tay Prisoner of War Rescue Operation" [see appendix table 11, Son Tay Raid Events].)

I put on my oxygen mask and inhaled oxygen-enriched air for about ten minutes while I adjusted my desk and console lighting to suit Capt. Bill Stripling and myself. Bill sat perpendicular to me on my right at a new navigation station jerry-rigged for the FLIR navigator. Because the lights we needed caused considerable window glare, we had to isolate ourselves from the rest of the cockpit by a thick curtain. We kept the rest of the cockpit as dark as possible so that the map readers could look outside without seeing the cockpit and their own faces mirrored in the windows. Capt. Norman Mazurek, our map-reading navigator, stood behind Maj. Harry Pannill's copilot seat and scanned whatever he could see directly below and to the right of the aircraft. Our third pilot, Capt. Mike Connaughton, stood behind the aircraft commander, Lt. Col. "Friday" Blosch, and did map reading to the left of the aircraft. Each map reader held charts in one hand and an amber, flashlight-size Aldus lamp in the other. They would turn this light on only when they needed to check something on their charts. Our charts were 1:250,000 scale. They had course lines with one-mile tick marks that ran from each turning point to the preceding one. Five-mile tick marks were larger than the one-mile ones, and the ten-mile ones were larger still. Doppler readout of distance to go to the next turning point could be quickly transferred to our tick marked charts and prompt us to approaching rivers, ridgelines, peaks, and any other significant landmarks.

Bill Stripling and I had tables for our charts, so we could walk the mileage tick marks with the needle points of our dividers. That way we could tell where we should be at our speed of 2.04 miles per minute every thirty seconds of time and correlate our radar and FLIR screens with prominent features on our charts. I had another set of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers topographic maps with 1:50,000 scale readily available. They showed more landscape details and had terrain elevation contours at twenty-meter intervals.

As soon as we settled down to a normal flight routine to join up with the A-1E Skyraiders from Nakhon Phanom, we received a very disturbing report that Cherry One pilots could not get the number three engine to

start. It was already well past their scheduled takeoff time. Suddenly it looked like we would get a call to take over the helicopter formation lead from Cherry One. I obtained a quick heading and distance to go to Udorn. We would have to reduce our cruising speed to arrive there at Cherry One's scheduled time. I am sure that our whole crew got an adrenalin rush realizing that maybe we would get to fly over the Son Tay POW camp after all.

The Ramstein crew could take off on three engines but could no longer provide drafting conditions for the HH-3 Banana. They could, however, fly at maximum three-engine airspeed and catch up with the A-1E Peaches and lead them on to the target area. I thought, "What if they start their engine once airborne? Could they then again resume their original helicopter formation role?" We expected directions from Monkey Mountain. It was Brigadier General Manor's call to have us switch the formation roles. We learned after the mission that he was about to order us to take over when Maj. Leon Franklin succeeded in getting his reluctant number three engine to spin. Cherry One took off at 11:18 P.M., twenty-three minutes behind the planned departure time.

In the meantime, completely blacked-out HC-130P tankers Lime One and Two departed from Udorn on time at 11:07 P.M. All the helicopters—the HH-3 Banana and five HH-53 Apples—began taking off ten minutes later. They formed up soon after takeoff, but then an unexpected event occurred. This is how a copilot of Apple Two, Maj. Jay M. Strayer, remembers it:

> We routinely fell into the seven ship formation, three helicopters stacking high on each side of the leading HC-130, when suddenly the call came to "break, break, break!" indicating that someone had lost sight of the formation lead and we were to execute the formation break up procedure. Each helicopter turned to a predetermined heading and climbed to a predetermined altitude for one minute and then returned to the original heading. The effect was a very widely separated formation, each helicopter 500 ft above the other and at varying distances away from the lead HC-130. I could see other members of the formation flying in and out of the clouds, and I thought we had blown the mission we had hardly started. Apparently a strange airplane had almost flown through the formation and someone had called the lost contact procedure to avoid a mid-air collision. As it turned out, our planning for such possible events, and

> the training for such, resulted in a rather routine formation break up with a subsequent rejoin being completed successfully.[9]

Because the aircraft involved in that incident maintained radio silence, we were not aware of it and continued on toward Nakhon Phanom, planning to get overhead two or three minutes after the scheduled A-1E takeoff. This timing was to ensure that they had enough time to establish their five-ship formation and be a few miles ahead of us toward our first turning point over the Mekong River, which separates Thailand from Laos.

The clandestine departure of the A-1E Peaches puzzled Nakhon Phanom's control tower crew. Their normal night shift routine was interrupted by their vice wing commander's visit. This is how Sgt. Phil Lombardo recorded it:

> The Vice Wing Commander arrived at the tower around 10:45 P.M. His first words were "No matter what happens, do not touch that crash phone." The crash phone is a hotline from the Tower to the Fire Department, Hospital, Base Ops. It was used to pass along information about aircraft in distress to those who would respond to the emergency. The Colonel's order meant that security was paramount. More important than a single pilot's life. Shortly after that he ordered the airfield lighting turned off, and informed us that we would not have radio contact with any of the participating aircraft. To me it seemed that turning off the airfield lights was a blatant signal that something out of the ordinary was going on. Normally, the lights were on continually from sunset to sunrise. The A-1s taxied out and made normal take offs. I never saw them due to the darkness. The only reason I knew that they were A-1s was the distinct sound of their engines. They joined up over the field, and went on their way.[10]

The join-up over the field was Maj. Jerry Rhein's idea. All aircraft were loaded up to their maximum takeoff weight, and he opted to take advantage of all the wind available. So they took off four minutes ahead of schedule into the wind and circled to join in a formation over the darkened field. This maneuver put them somewhat ahead of our intentionally late over-fly. Everything else went as planned. I located them with my radar a few miles ahead of us after we headed toward our first turning point over the Mekong River. Bill tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to his FLIR, which showed five bright aircraft exhausts in a V formation.

We closed in on them slowly and flew under them so that they could pick up the blue lights on the topside of our wings. We were totally blacked out from below. Soon after we established ourselves in the lead, we ran into some low clouds. Our pilots could see their tops before we got into them and climbed on top as if we were in a normally planned altitude change. The Peaches followed us, and once we were in the clear everything returned to normal.

Our flight plan called for us to be at Skyline TACAN, Channel 108, at 12:45 A.M., eighteen minutes after tanker Lime One and its entourage of helicopters that were topping off their tanks. After crossing this navigational checkpoint, Lime One was going to break radio silence and give us an estimated time for arrival at turning point 4. The flight leg from Channel 108 to turning point 4 was seventy-seven miles. On this leg Cherry One had to take over the helicopter lead from Lime One and begin the Assault Formation low-level route to Son Tay.

The moon was rising above the horizon from about 10 to 18 degrees during the refueling and helicopter lead switch. It was still low enough for Peach One's copilot John Waresh to note that it dropped out of sight now and then as we began our low-level penetration through the mountain valleys: "Several valleys we drove through were so deep that mountains, karsts, trees, or whatever eclipsed the moon. When that happened it was like diving into an inkwell. You could make out only a few feet of wing tip and that was only because of our own exhaust flame."[11]

We expected the moon to be at our one o'clock position and up at a full 37 degrees when we arrived over Son Tay.[12]

Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin

No one at Yankee Station would enjoy normal sleep on the night of 20–21 November. Everyone knew that something unusual was about to take place. The absence of bombs on the fourteen attack A-7 Corsairs puzzled the USS *Oriskany*'s deck crews. Instead of bombs, Zuni rocket pods with Mark 24 flares hung from their wings. Only the BARCAP (Barrier Combat Air Patrol) and FORCECAP (Force Combat Air Patrol) F-8 Crusaders carried their normal combat loads of air-to-air rockets and 20-mm gun ammunition. Rumors had it that they may even be going into the forbidden Route Package VI-B.

For air strike purposes, North Vietnam was divided between the Navy

and the Air Force into seven geographical regions called route packages. Air Force was responsible for targets in Route Package I just north of the Demilitarized Zone and in Route Packages V and VI-A northwest and west of Hanoi. The Navy owned targets in Route Packages II through IV. These three extended northward along the coast. The Navy's Route Package VI-B was east of Hanoi and stretched all the way north to the Chinese border.

Flight crews had more detailed briefings than did the deck crews, but they remained more perplexed than ever. They were not given any targets to bomb. They were to fly prescribed safe routes and jettison powerful two-million candlepower flares to attract the widest possible attention and then return to their carriers. Those were not combat missions. Their flight paths were out of known enemy SAM and AAA defenses. Their commanders, who obviously did not know what this big diversion was all about, could only assure them during the pre-mission briefings that they would be proud of their role in the operation once it was over. After these unusual crew briefings, twenty-five of *Oriskany*'s aircraft were ready for an unprecedented no-harm-to-the-enemy attack.

The situation among the flight crews of the USS *Ranger* was the same. Their carrier was rushed to Yankee Station for some very important reason. Was this it? The carrier had eight A-6 Intruders that were armed with flares instead of bombs. Only the MIGCAP F-4 Phantoms and the RESCAP (Rescue Combat Air Patrol) A-7 Corsairs were equipped with normal combat ordnance. When the pilots heard their briefings, they hoped that the night's operation would be some kind of prelude to the resumption of bombing in the Navy's northern route packages. Was this to be the first combat mission of their cruise?

With all the unusual pre-strike excitement and activity at Yankee Station, only four men knew what was at stake during that night. They were Vice Admiral Bardshar, Rear Admiral Ramage, Captain Hill, and Commander Hoskins. Bardshar's chief of staff, Captain Kenyon, who had learned about the prisoner rescue plan during Brigadier General Manor and Colonel Simons's visit, remained at Subic Bay. The foursome knew many men who had taken off from their carriers and never returned. No one knew the exact number of imprisoned airmen that could still be alive, but up to that time the three carriers listed fifty-seven of their airmen as missing in action (MIA).[13] Unknown numbers of them ended up in inhumane North Vietnamese prisons, and there was now under way a bold plan to bring some of them home. Who would not be excited over

such a prospect? They all had close friends who could just be among the sixty or so that could be rescued that night.

Strike Formation Timing Problems

Flying over Laos at 12:30 A.M., not long after we resolved our cloud cover problem, we received Lime One's call for estimated arrival at point 4: "Six minutes behind." It was an unpleasant surprise. When the call was made, we were forty-five miles away from Skyline, flying about 2 knots faster than the flight plan because we were almost one minute behind our Skyline TACAN estimated arrival time. We were encountering 15- to 20-knot headwinds that would account for the helicopters being about three minutes late at Skyline. We were not aware of their time lost during their breakup and rejoin maneuver, and I assumed that the same winds would affect their seventy-seven-mile refueling track, causing them to fall three more minutes behind. We slowed down as much as we could without causing flight control problems for our A-1Es. It worked. We reached Skyline at 12:49 A.M., four minutes behind our zero wind flight plan, and we needed to lose only two minutes more.

Then at 1:16 A.M., when we were already five minutes behind, we heard Cherry One at turning point 4 with their estimate for turning point 7: "One minute early." This was an unexpected development. We then had to speed up and gain six minutes before reaching the initial point on the Black River. We could have increased our airspeed past 150 knots, but we opted to stay within the same speed parameters that we practiced at Eglin. We pushed the speed up to 147 knots. This would put us at turning point 7a four and a half minutes behind. That was not good enough. We needed to do something else. I coordinated with "Friday" Blosch, and we agreed to skip turning point 8a and fly directly from point 7a to point 9a. (Turning points for the Strike Formation had numbers with the letter "a" as a suffix.) I plotted our new course of 037 degrees at 21.2 nautical miles. That route would take eight minutes and it would put us at turning point 9a two and a half minutes behind. Bill Stripling checked my measurements. I put our new course on the 1:50,000-scale map to check for six-mile-wide corridor clearances. We were flying at sixty-eight hundred feet. That flight altitude was sufficient to get us safely to point 9a.

Cherry One gave us its final timing report over turning point 7 at 1:38:30 A.M. Their estimate for the initial point (IP) was "On time." That

automatically reduced our own behind time to a more manageable one and a half minute. We could now gain more time by speeding up during the descent into the Black River Valley and by avoiding going over the IP. We would intercept the eleven-mile leg from the IP to Son Tay a few miles past that vital turning point. This improvised shortcut would have us intersecting our final inbound track at very close to the precisely planned time. Keith Grimes predicted 5- to 10-knot northeast headwinds for the Red River Valley area.

Our 19.2-mile distance between turning points 9a and 10a was crucial for sneaking into the Red River basin without detection. This is where we experienced intermittent line-of-sight exposure to the Na San early warning radar for about three minutes. Cherry One and its helicopters were exposed to the same radar between their turning points 7 and 8. Their route was about five miles south of ours. Their exposure began a full thirteen minutes before ours and, because of their slower airspeed, lasted almost four and a half minutes. David Kender monitored Na San's radar energy beamed in our direction as its antenna rotated in a clockwise direction. Would this routine radar rotation pause and become a sector scan aimed toward us? That would indicate that we had been detected and that we were being tracked. Fortunately, this never happened. North Vietnamese early warning radar continued its routine scan. Its operators did not see us. They failed to isolate our echoes from the mountain ground clutter on their radar monitors. They also might have been distracted by reports from the China and North Vietnam Cross Border Air Defense System in the east. By that time their Hanoi and Haiphong area radars were busy tracking multiple targets generated by the U.S. Navy from the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Command Post at Monkey Mountain

Brigadier General Manor and his staff monitored the launch of Air Force aircraft from Thailand bases. Command post coaches pointed out each departing aircraft on the large screen that depicted activity over Thailand and Laos. This imagery was fed to Monkey Mountain by radar from Udorn. The same radar would follow the Fruit Salad formations until they were lost from view in the mountains on the border between Laos and North Vietnam. Visiting staff members watched other screens and reacquainted themselves with the Southeast Asia terrain displayed on

them. They were grasping the vast amounts of data being fed into the Tactical Air Control Center from the Air Force radars and the Navy ship in the Gulf of Tonkin. This watch was interrupted when word came that Franklin could not get one engine started. Manor and Clark huddled over this unexpected event and concluded that Franklin's C-130 could take off with three engines and assume the A-1E formation lead. Already airborne, Blosch could be diverted to fly over Udorn and lead the helicopter formation. But before Manor could issue this formation change order, Franklin's crew brought the reluctant engine to life. After that event Manor's staff focused its attention on the screen that showed takeoffs and assembly of the helicopter and A-1E Fruit Salad formations.

Once all the Fruit Salad aircraft were over Laos the TACC's staff directed the attention of visitors to another screen that displayed the EC-121T Frogs and other aircraft that were already high over the Gulf. There were two RC-135 Combat Apples from Okinawa and one radio relay RC-135 from U-Tapao. The crew of Frog One was already at their five-hundred-foot low-level racetrack orbit. At 12:35 A.M., shortly before they began to climb into their higher eight-thousand-foot working orbit just outside the SAM range southeast of Haiphong harbor, a broken oil line caused the aircraft commander to cage the number-two engine and relinquish his aircraft's assigned operational role to the airborne standby, Frog Two. The two aircraft switched places and the sadly disappointed crew of Frog One made an emergency recovery at Da Nang AB. As one would expect, some of the crew questioned aircraft commander Barwick's decision to abort the mission. Jake had told them about the rescue mission after they were airborne. They had become so pumped up about the great event that was about to take place that they wanted to continue the mission on only three engines. But the plan called for a fully operational EC-121T to link up with the TACC-NS at Monkey Mountain. That was why there were two Frogs instead of only one.

Captain Edney was the weapons controller on Frog Two. His radar crew greeted their unexpected challenge with great enthusiasm. By that time everyone knew what their mission entailed. Captain Edney had been the only man on that aircraft who knew about the Son Tay phase of their mission prior to takeoff. Once in the air, he avoided using the intercom and went from one work station to another explaining to individuals and small groups what was about to happen on the ground.[14] The crew of Frog Two was ready and eager to prove the new equipment's worth during its first combat employment. All systems checked out perfectly on their

way to the Gulf, and they were on standby status. Now they would exploit the new electronic systems and give Manor and his battle staff real-time depiction of aircraft positions over Son Tay and, if needed, provide friendly aircraft with MIG warnings and intercept vectoring in case of a nighttime aerial dogfight. They would track all aircraft and provide navigational assistance to anyone in an emergency, coordinate rescue of any downed aircraft, and furnish radio relays, if required. Opportunities like that did not come very often in one's entire career.

Attention at Monkey Mountain shifted back to airspace over Laos, monitored at the Udorn Command Center, where everything appeared normal. Helicopters were heading north and refueling from Lime One. Next, the Wild Weasel F-105 Firebirds took to the air in pairs from Korat at 12:45 A.M. Then at 1:18 the first wave of F-4 Falcons took off from Udorn. All headed to hook up with the KC-135 tankers from U-Tapao that were already in position on Tracks Lemon and Orange, which were clearly outlined on the command post display screen.

Strict security applied to the ten MIGCAP F-4 Falcon and five F-105 Firebird crews. They did not require special training for the raid. Even though the key planners of these fighter units received a briefing at Takhli on all aspects of the mission, the details of the POW rescue mission were not passed down to the crew members who were chosen to fly. All they knew was that they would provide protection for a very important operation west of Hanoi. A few guessed correctly that the joint Army and Air Force mission involved a POW rescue. Some learned about what was happening from scant radio transmissions they picked up in the air while dodging SAMs and AAA. Others discovered the truth after they landed at Udorn.

The Naval Task Force 77 Diversion

The first Navy support aircraft took off from Da Nang in the Republic of Vietnam shortly after 1:00 A.M. It was a KA-3B tanker that belonged to the USS *Ranger,* and it was only the first one of thirteen tankers that TF 77 would launch that night. Captain Hill and his planners made sure that they had enough available fuel over the Gulf of Tonkin even for the worst possible contingency, just in case things did not go according to plan. They even made provisions to have the Navy tankers take on fuel from the two Air Force KC-135s that brought a full load of fuel all the

way from U-Tapao, Thailand. The primary mission of this KA-3B was to top off the fuel tanks of the first two F-4 Phantoms from the USS *Ranger* because they would need extra fuel to carry out their dual TARCAP and MIGCAP mission.

The next six aircraft, also from Da Nang, were EKA-3B ECM tankers. Two of them belonged to the USS *Oriskany,* two to the USS *Ranger,* and two to the USS *Hancock.* They were too big and too heavy for normal operations off carrier decks. One *Oriskany* pilot recalls, "At the time my unit was assigned to the Air Group deployed aboard the USS *Oriskany,* which was assigned to 'Yankee Station,' but my unit was operating out of Da Nang simply because we could carry more fuel and our size allowed more free space on the flight deck. The A3 is quite a large plane, as a matter of fact the largest to ever operate from a carrier. We had a secondary mission as a tanker and could carry much more fuel if we operated from a land base."[15] The EKA-3B also enjoyed a better margin of safety operating from land whenever that option was available. Landing signal officers (LSOs), who had to give them directions from the carrier decks, did not like to have them come down with their wide wingspans so close over their heads. Lt. C. W. Gilluly, who had flown EKA-3Bs before, was the LSO that night. This is what he relates:

> As an LSO, I can tell you it was always interesting waving them on the carrier—especially at night. On a small ship like the *Oriskany* the wing tips literally went over your head on the LSO platform when it landed. Plus, no matter what the pilot did, when it caught the hook on landing, the god damned thing always bounced straight up in the air before it rolled to a dead stop—with its nose pointing out over the angled deck. All the pilot and BN [bombardier/navigator] could see was water in front of them—the enlisted guys in the back just prayed.[16]

The six EKA-3Bs had a dual mission to perform. Their primary one was to engage the enemy in electronic warfare with sophisticated electronic countermeasures equipment. They flew on a forty-two-mile track spread out at altitudes of between twenty-one thousand and twenty-four thousand feet just outside the lethal range of surface-to-air missiles and jammed all detected radar and radio frequencies of the enemy. They were scheduled to remain on their track until 2:30 A.M., by which time all attack aircraft were to have crossed the exit point "BUDWEISER" and be

recovering on the decks of their carriers. Their secondary role was as tankers providing fuel for any Navy aircraft in need.

Carrier Flight Decks

Casual observers of aircraft takeoffs from carriers focus so much attention on the airplanes that they miss seeing the crucial work of the deck crews, which make such amazing events possible. Admirals Bardshar and Ramage were not just casual observers. From their vantage point on the bridge they could look down from the bow to the stern and witness every piece of action that was unfolding below them. This was the beginning of what became the largest nighttime carrier operation of the Vietnam War. Technology, human skills, and bravery were about to be tested in a well-choreographed carrier flight deck operation that required precision movements from all participants.

Deck crews moved quickly with the precision of a well-rehearsed drill team. Each man had an exact spot to stand on and a specific path in which to pace in and out as each aircraft moved into position for a catapulted takeoff. Each aircraft's wings were unfolded and inspected. This was followed by a timely raising of hinged jet blast deflectors that forced hot engine exhaust up and away from other deck activity. The aircraft was then guided to a precise spot where the crew coupled the nose wheel strut to the catapult with holdback devices. After the final check of connections the pilot flashed his aircraft's external lights to the catapult officer in charge. He applied desired engine takeoff power and braced himself for the jolt that came once the steam pressure built up enough to break the holdback fitting. That freed his aircraft to shoot out like a dart over the bow edge of the carrier. Once free of the carrier deck it would became a flying airplane under the complete control of its pilot, whose body had just begun recovering from the tremendous G-force pressure caused by the sudden acceleration from a standstill to more than 150 knots in under three seconds. The roar of jet engines was deafening and the dull but resounding thump of the catapult was felt throughout the ship. Then, without a break, a new dance would begin. The water-cooled jet blast deflectors were expeditiously lowered so that the next aircraft could taxi over them and take its place at the catapult just as its steam-driven piston and hook slid back into the launch hook-up position. Shadowy figures of goggled and helmeted men moved like fireflies on a summer evening. Each wore

a different colored float coat with sewn-in reflective tapes, which identified his deck crew function. But unlike the dance of the fireflies, their movements were not random. Their steps were well rehearsed through a very rigorous and disciplined training. They were very young and hailed from all across the United States. Some were mere senior teenagers, high school graduates from the classes of 1968 and 1969.

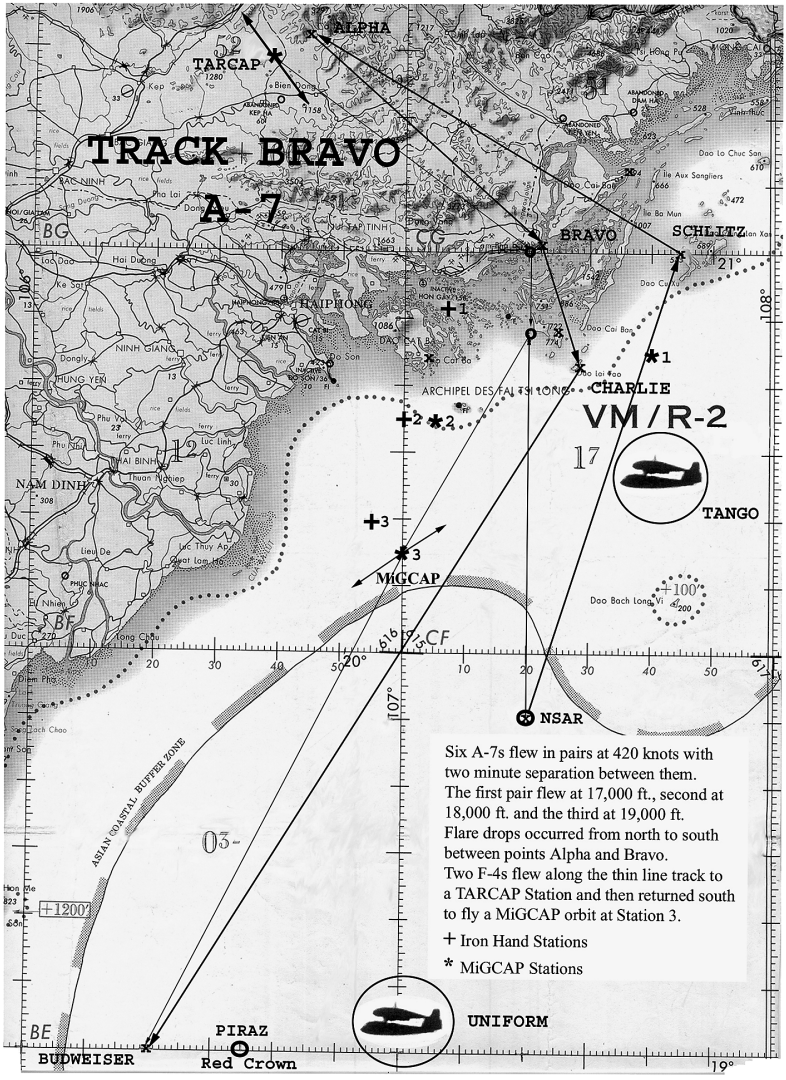
The USS *Oriskany*

The first aircraft off the USS *Oriskany* was the airborne early warning E-1B, voice call "Tango." It was heading to a designated station due east of Haiphong from which it would provide flight following for all mission aircraft.

Next, in pairs, came the first attack aircraft. The first one was an A-7 piloted by the commanding officer of Carrier Air Group 19, Cdr. Douglas F. Mow. He moved to the number 1 catapult on the starboard side. His wingman, at catapult number 2, was the operations scheduling officer of Attack Squadron 155 (VA-155), Lt. Russell Clayton York. They would make up the first of the three sections of A-7 pairs on Track Bravo.

The next pair of A-7s, with Lt. Cdr. Joseph D. Cole, VA-155 administrative officer, and Lt. James H. Oliver, followed the first section. All appeared normal from the bridge, but one of the aircraft had a problem. As soon as Joe Cole recovered from the effects of the catapult launch, he realized that his radios were not working. He could receive but not transmit. He communicated with his wingman Jim Oliver by light signals and the two decided to press on in spite of Joe's predicament.

Soon thereafter, Jim ran into a predicament of his own. He lost his navigational TACAN that gave him distance and bearing to the USS *Jouett,* the ship at North Search and Rescue (NSAR). Now both of them had valid reasons to air abort their mission, but they had flown together many times and the mission ahead of them was too intriguing to pass up.[17] Something very important was about to happen around Hanoi that night and they wanted to be part of it. Besides, their abort would mess things up for many others. They could not just turn around and land to claim a spare A-7 that was on a fifteen-minute alert. *Oriskany* was a small carrier that could not support simultaneous takeoffs and landings in an operation



Diversionary Track Bravo, with its protective TARCAP flown by two F-4s. (Computer scan photo of Air Navigation Chart with overprint by John Gargus)

that involved twenty-five of her aircraft. Her landing deck was still full of aircraft with folded wings that were waiting to be positioned for their takeoffs. They would have to spend too much time in orbit waiting for the landing deck to clear. On top of that, late aircraft on Track Bravo would mess up timing for the two TARCAP F-4s that were to remain on their station near Kep Air Base, North Vietnam, for only ten minutes before heading southeast to provide cover for the EKA-3Bs from MIGCAP Station 3 for the duration of the diversion. The experience of these two pilots allowed them to prevail, and they continued on their track as planned, one without a radio and the other without a system to navigate. The mute was now leading the blind.

The third section of A-7s, with Lt. Gary Ostrander, did not have any problems. The "Silver Foxes," pilots from VA-155, were on their way.

Among other early takeoffs were two F-8Js Crusaders from *Oriskany.* Lt. "Bull" Durham, VF-194 safety officer, led them to provide BARCAP protection for two high-flying USAF Combat Apples with one RC-135 radio relay and all other Navy aircraft east of the MIGCAP line established by the lower flying F-4s from the USS *Ranger.* The two Crusaders flew what would normally be a routine and boring six-mile racetrack orbit at thirty-four thousand feet just east of MIGCAP Station 2, except for the great fireworks provided by dozens of diversionary flares and wild North Vietnamese SAMs that appeared to have been fired harmlessly in a barrage pattern. Bull recalls, "It was more hostile fire in two hours than I had seen in two cruises."[18]

Most aircraft maintained radio silence and flew blacked out. Even though they had their assigned tracks with safe altitude separations and were closely monitored by Red Crown's radar controllers, Safety Officer Durham did not feel comfortable noting that the stars winked off and on from time to time when some of the Air Force high flyers went past his poorly defined nighttime horizon. He considered the risk of a collision higher than a small chance that a MIG would show up from nowhere. So he had both Crusaders go lights bright and flashing.[19] He wanted to be seen.

Task Force Admirals

Bardshar and Ramage witnessed the initial launches from the bridge. The thundering noise of jet engines was deafening but pleasing to both admi-

rals. They watched the plumes of fire disappear into the night one by one as pilots steered north to assigned airspaces from which they would begin their bizarre mock attacks. All seemed to go well on the *Oriskany.* The same was expected from the deck of the newly arrived *Ranger,* which was several miles to the south. It was time to leave the noise of the bridge and retreat to the much quieter Combat Information Center to monitor the entire operation electronically. Bardshar went there directly, while Ramage opted to walk around the deck to lend support to his men before he retreated to his own war room. He could monitor the unfolding mock attack on the North Vietnamese coast from there with more diligent attention. Bardshar, commander of TF 77, left him in charge of this operation. The presence of both of them in the Combat Information Center could make the command authority somewhat awkward. Events of the night would be puzzling enough for all the uninitiated operators in that congested room.

Bardshar had an ideal and technologically up-to-date setup with the USS *Wainwright*'s Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone coverage and the Naval Tactical Data System communications tie-in. That gave him a complete picture of the Gulf area and the North Vietnamese landmass all the way to the mountains past the Red River. In stateside geographical terms, if the USS *Wainwright* were located in the waters north of Cape Cod, the ship's coverage would encompass the entire landmass of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.[20] He could see big screens with real-time displays of airborne aircraft and follow them as they moved through the skies from one planned turning point to another. He could monitor aircraft radio frequencies and listen to radio transmissions of aircrews. He also had access to what the enemy was saying over the airwaves. Interpreters on an airborne EP-3 from Guam, and also his own seaborne ones, would translate commands generated by the North Vietnamese defense network and provide him timely inputs on enemy responses to the attack.

At first glance, the greenish, glowing displays appeared to show a disorganized group of semicircles that represented friendly aircraft moving in every possible direction. But a prolonged look at each screen would reveal that there was a precise order to each aircraft's movement. Each had a definite airspace to go to and then depart from at a predetermined time. Bardshar knew the battle plan layout with its numerous geographical points that were identified by numbers, letters of the alphabet, proper names like "MARY" and "ALICE," or even favorite beers like "SCHLITZ"

and "BUDWEISER." He observed the screens with satisfaction as the naval forces moved in for their carefully staged mock attack. Everything was unfolding as planned. All aircraft were transmitting IFF that identified them to the PIRAZ radar controllers, giving them their speed, direction, and altitude. Aircraft were crossing their predetermined positions, and the eavesdropping interpreters reported that the North Vietnamese radars were already hot.

The USS *Ranger*

The first aircraft off the USS *Ranger* was the airborne early warning E-1B, call sign "Uniform." Its assigned orbit was on the 19th parallel just east of the PIRAZ ship, the USS *Wainwright.* "Uniform" provided coverage for Yankee Station in the waters to the south and to the FORCECAP F-8s to the west.

The E-1B was followed by a flight of four A-7E RESCAP Corsairs led by the commanding officer of VA-25, Cdr. Felton M. "Hump" Humphreys. Like everyone else, he had no idea what that night's primary mission was. Just like the others from the *Ranger,* he was puzzled by the hurried transfer of his carrier to the war zone. He sensed the importance of what TF 77 was tasked to do in spite of the weird armaments loaded aboard all attack aircraft. The restriction on armaments did not apply to his mission. "Hump" Humphreys would lead four A-7Es on a RESCAP sortie. Their weapon loads would consist of four to six Rockeyes and a full load of 20-mm ammunition. Each one would also carry flares that would be used in the recovery of any airman whose flight ended up in the water, or even worse, somewhere on the mainland. This is what he recalled many years later:

> If someone had been in the water I would have been the on scene leader until the special Helo SAR guys arrived. If the bad guys were trying to capture the downed aircrew, we (that being the 4 A-7Es) would have used what we had to keep them at bay until rescue picked them up. Since Rockeye is a large area weapon we would not have used them near the downed crew. The A-7E had the Gatling gun that fired at 6,000 20mm rounds per min., so it would have been used when close to our guys and the Rockeyes for boats, etc. that were farther away.[21]

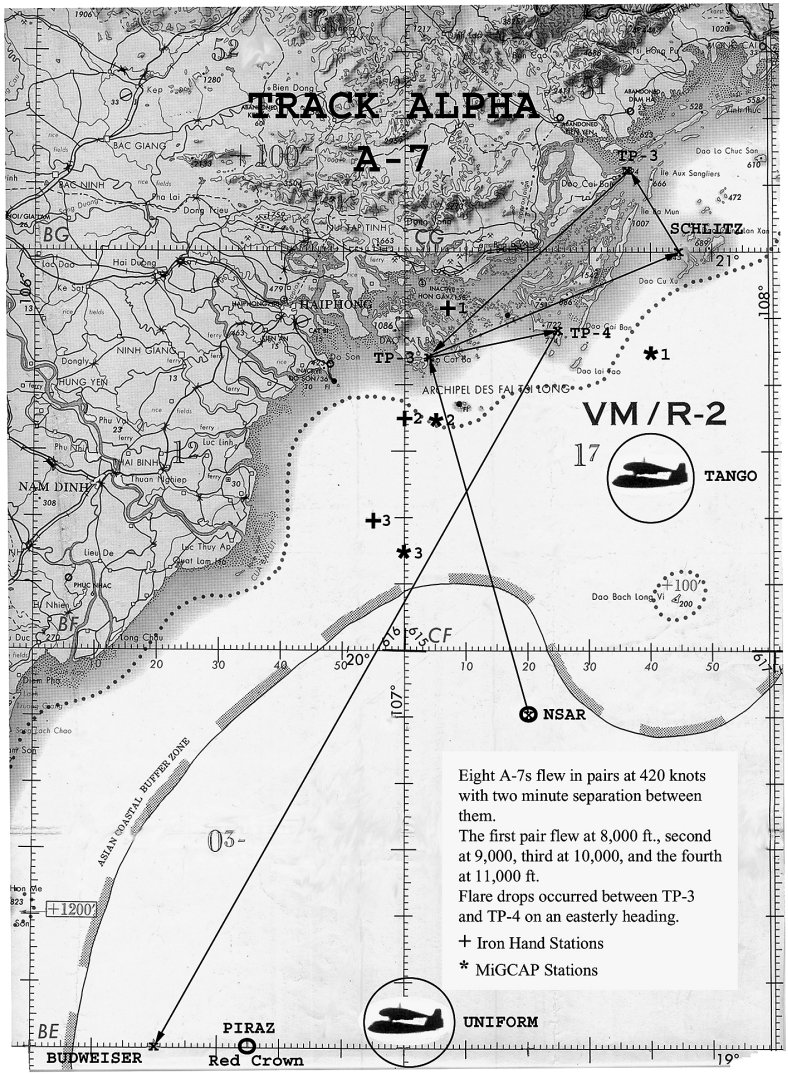
RESCAP Corsairs took off early to be on station before the attack aircraft departed on their flare-dropping tracks. The first two Corsairs received radar vectors to refuel from one of the EKA-3Bs, and they then flew north of NSAR to establish their elongated, low-level track that went from Don Bach Long Vi Island to the vicinity of point MARY. "Hump" Humphreys ended up flying at the lowest RESCAP altitude of five thousand feet, which limited his view of the mainland. The others were stacked up above him at between six thousand and eight thousand. It was an uneventful flight that made them wonder what was happening far beyond their horizon, somewhere near Hanoi. When it was all over, the second section of Hump's flight had to pick up some fuel from a tanker before they were vectored to a designated area to dump their unused flares. Landing on carriers with a load of flares was not permitted for safety reasons.[22]

NSAR (North Search and Rescue)

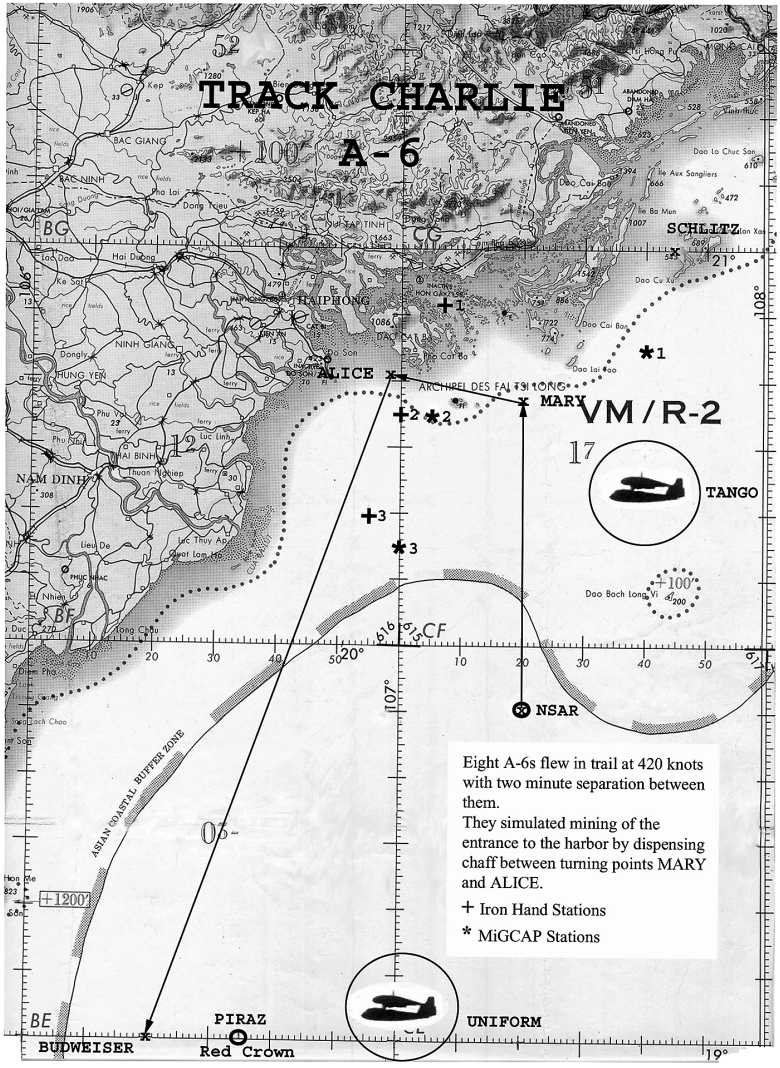
The USS *Jouett* was positioned on North SAR station at 19–50N, 107–20E. The ship had a TACAN transmitter and served as the common navigational departure point for all attack aircraft on Tracks Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie.

A steady stream of attack aircraft began departing from there after the Silver Foxes, led by Douglas Mow, crossed the common navigational departure point at 1:30 A.M. At 1:32 A.M. another pair of A-7s crossed it heading toward Track Alpha, which zigzagged over the islands east of Haiphong. They were also from *Oriskany* and flew at 420 knots but at eight thousand feet. This first pair was followed by three more that crossed NSAR at two-minute intervals and flew at stepped-up altitudes of nine thousand, ten thousand, and eleven thousand feet. The first pair began dropping flares at 1:56 A.M. while flying due east of Haiphong between turning points 3 and 4.

The last wave to depart NSAR consisted of eight A-6s from the USS *Ranger.* Their mission was to simulate dropping mines into the approaches to the Haiphong harbor. They also flew in pairs at two-minute intervals and at 420 knots. They began departing at 2:03 A.M. at scattered low altitudes that were below four thousand feet. They all dropped chaff between points MARY and ALICE while heading directly toward Haiphong.



Diversionary Track Alpha. (Computer scan photo of Air Navigation Chart with overprint by John Gargus)



Diversionary Track Charlie. (Computer scan photo of Air Navigation Chart with overprint by John Gargus)

Track Bravo

The Silver Foxes on Track Bravo experienced no problems while northbound. They climbed to their assigned altitudes: the first section to seventeen thousand, the second to eighteen thousand, and the last to nineteen thousand feet. They crossed NSAR heading north-northeast at 420 knots right on time. As they looked to the left, they could see the lights of Haiphong and of Hanoi farther to the west. What they saw did not look like a country at war. After a prolonged bombing pause north of the 19th parallel the enemy became complacent. The aircrews could see many ships in the harbor. All the lights were on, so the normal night shift must have been busy offloading war supplies from the Soviet bloc countries. North Vietnam's early warning radars were scanning the growing numbers of aircraft over the Gulf, but the threatening AAA and SAM radars were still dormant. The Silver Foxes turned inland at point SCHLITZ and proceeded on their route. The air was smooth and visibility excellent. The mountains below were dark, and the view of Haiphong, now seen from the north, was beautiful.

These six A-7s would make the deepest penetration into North Vietnam. Their Bravo track would take them to a turnaround point thirty miles northeast of Kep Air Base, which was home to about three dozen MIG 15s, 17s, and 19s. Even though none of them were expected to be on alert that night, two MIG 21s would be pulling alert duty west of Hanoi at Phuc Yen. The unarmed, flare-dropping A-7s needed some protection just in case a MIG came to challenge them. So the two F-4 Phantoms that had taken off from the USS *Ranger* and refueled from the KA-3B out of Da Nang would fly just south of Track Bravo to a TARCAP orbit point twenty miles from Kep. There they would loiter for ten minutes and then head back over the water, following the A-7s on their eastbound flare-dropping track. Once over the Gulf of Tonkin, the two F-4s would proceed at twenty-six thousand feet to MIGCAP Station 3, which was thirty-eight miles southeast of Haiphong. There they would assume their second mission, manning the south portion of the MIGCAP perimeter situated between the Iron Hand SAM and AAA radar suppression stations and the high-flying aircraft over the water to the east.

After the first pair of F-4s took off from the USS *Ranger* and headed along Track Bravo toward the TARCAP near Kep Air Base, the other four F-4s lined up to move into their respective MIGCAP orbits at Stations

1 and 2. Station 1 was the northernmost, just east of the islands where the F-4s orbited at sixteen thousand feet. Station 2 was off the entrance to Haiphong harbor at fourteen thousand feet. From their vantage points the F-4s could provide protection for all tracks outside of Haiphong. They would pursue any MIGs launched against the Navy. "Red Crown," the PIRAZ ship USS *Wainwright*, would provide them with MIG intercept vectors, alone or with inputs from one of the airborne E-1B radar platforms.

Once the Silver Foxes turned back from their deepest penetration north of Kep Air Base to begin their flare drop, the AAA Firecans and SAM Fansongs became very active, tracking some of the aircraft that approached their lethal zone. The A-7s on Track Bravo were outside the effective ranges of both of these antiaircraft systems. They continued to jettison Mark 24 flares one by one over planned locations. Cole and Oliver used light signals to communicate and watched the powerful two-million-candlepower flares dropped by Mow's section, which flew about fourteen miles ahead of them. A 20-knot crosswind caused the flare parachutes to drift southward toward Haiphong. Each one of the A-7s dispensed eight flares from the Zuni rocket pods mounted on their wings.

Soon the strobing on their electronic countermeasures equipment became very intense. The North Vietnamese were finally ready to engage the Navy intruders. Then as the lead section was about to go "feet wet" (cross from over land to over the water) the SAM launchings began. Once over the water, they turned right and headed south-southwest toward exit point BUDWEISER and Yankee Station. They were now much closer to Haiphong, and looking to the right they had a better view of the harbor than they did on the way north. The forty-eight flares they had dropped just a few minutes before lit up the countryside north of the city. Behind them were sixty-four more burning flares dropped by A-7s on Track Alpha. And some fourteen thousand feet below them, the work of eight A-6s was unfolding. They were simulating the mining of the approaches to the harbor by dropping chaff and more flares. Countless AAA tracers and some of the twenty SAMs launched against the Navy aircraft that night highlighted this eerie scene time and time again.

Out of harm's way, Jim Oliver was bothered by the intense strobing of his electronic countermeasures equipment and thus could not get a clear view of what was happening on his right. Because his strobing was caused by too many radars that were out of the lethal range, he turned off his distracting warning equipment.[23]

Iron Hand

While the attack aircraft flew along their designated tracks, the A-7 Iron Hands from the USS *Ranger* moved into their respective positions at orbit points ZULU 1, 2, and 3. These were located between the North Vietnamese shoreline and the attack aircraft tracks. The Iron Hands maintained orbits at altitudes of twenty-eight thousand, thirty thousand, and thirty-two thousand feet, from which they played electronic chess games with AAA and SAM guidance radars. These fire control radars would attempt to lock on various aircraft from time to time and interrupt their target acquisitions whenever the A-7s turned inbound toward them. Those that persisted in target acquisitions could be attacked. Iron Hands were permitted to swoop down from their orbits and fire Shrike missiles at radars that continued tracking them.

Cdr. Weston H. Byng, executive officer of VA-113, was one of the seasoned Iron Hand pilots selected to fly that night. Known to all as "Ham" Byng, he was just beginning his third cruise in the Gulf of Tonkin aboard the USS *Ranger.* Things did not go well for him on departure. His wingman aborted on the deck, and "Ham" found himself flying alone to his thirty-two-thousand-foot ZULU 3 orbit. Even though he would be out of the lethal range of known SAMs, he would have no one in his orbit heading toward the hostile threat while he was turning over the Gulf for another pass toward land. His ECM equipment was registering intensive radar activity aimed in his direction, but he saw only one SAM that came up to about thirty thousand feet just west of where he was. As far as he was concerned, that qualified for hostile fire. He recalls that "on inbound leg I got many radar returns. At such high altitude, 32,000 feet, I would get good range, so on one leg I lofted a Shrike into the crowd. I couldn't know the effect but it probably got somebody's attention."[24] His Shrike was one of only three fired by the Navy pilots at North Vietnamese radars that night.

Tanker Aircraft

Lt. Jack P. Connell of the VA-153 "Blue Tail Flies" was one of the pilots of four A-7E tankers from the USS *Oriskany* that were to provide assistance for anyone who bolted and needed more fuel for return passes

to land on his carrier. Connell realized that something very important was about to happen when he witnessed the arrival of Bardshar and his staff aboard *Oriskany*. Closed-door meetings with admirals and intelligence officers followed, and the chaplain announced a special church call for that evening. Feeling the suspense of what was about to happen, he decided that it would be a good idea to attend that church service. His most memorable mission moments occurred before his catapulted takeoff:

> I distinctly remember sitting in the cockpit after engine start, the canopy and aircraft buttoned up, and all pre launch checks complete, and sensing just how bad the weather was. My aircraft was spotted on the port side on the angle, just aft of midship. As the ship rolled to starboard I was almost hanging in the straps, and as it rolled back to port I felt like I was lying on my back. It was the worst rolling and pitching deck I had experienced, and I was concerned about maintaining control after the chains were broken down to taxi to the catapult. This was late in our cruise and the deck was oily and the nonskid had worn off. With severely pitching and rolling deck covered with salt spray, an aircraft with its brakes locked could easily enter a bad skid. As they broke me down to taxi to the cat, the pitching and rolling decreased and I was catapulted without any problems (glad I went to church that day).[25]

Lieutenant Connell's aircraft was the last one launched from the USS *Oriskany* that night. His flight was uneventful. He remembers that no one hooked up with him for the customary plug and transfer of a token amount of fuel that normally took place as soon as each tanker got airborne to ensure that the tanker's refueling system was operating properly. Because his fuel supply would not be required until mission aircraft began their recoveries, Connell had instructions to fly up to the vicinity of points MARY and ALICE before returning to designated airspace at Yankee Station. That flight north gave him an opportunity to observe some of the fireworks display in the vicinity of Haiphong. He had to cross the tracks of several other aircraft at various assigned altitudes. On his way back Red Crown cautioned him that he was closing in on an unidentified aircraft that might have been the USAF's EC-121T radar platform. He dove beneath it and proceeded to the vicinity of *Oriskany* to await the returning strike aircraft.[26]

Diversion Monitoring

Bardshar listened to his pilots and controllers as they exchanged air traffic information and to the interpreters to learn if the enemy had detected Air Force aircraft approaching from the west. All seemed to go as planned. The enemy was focused on the Navy, and his ability to handle all the tracks from the Gulf was being severely tested. He saw numerous IFF returns from the Air Force aircraft. The first ones were from the F-105 Wild Weasels that performed the same SAM and AAA suppression as his Iron Hands. Then there were five more from the first wave of five F-4s flying MIGCAP. Not long after that the confluence of the Black and Red Rivers became saturated with thirteen more returns that represented the IFF squawking helicopter and A-1E fighter formations escorted by two MC-130E(I)s. He listened intently as the Air Force H-hour approached and nodded with approval when a radio relay message told him that the raiders had reached the POW camp at just after 2:18 A.M.

Bardshar paid particular attention to the night alert MIGs at Phuc Yen. Raiders were already on the ground, and two MIG pilots were ready for takeoff at the end of the runway. The Son Tay POW compound was only seventeen miles away. They could get there in three to four minutes. The MIG pilots had no idea what was happening so close to them. They could see the fireworks caused by the naval flares over Haiphong and were asking for permission to take off so that they could be vectored to intercept their enemy. The equally frustrated controllers rejected all their pleas. They themselves lacked specific instructions from their superiors in the air defense network. Bardshar knew very well that the MIG pilots could never take off for combat without specific instructions from their controllers. It was a positive hint that MIGs would not be committed that night. The clearest indicator about nonemployment of MIGs came when the North Vietnamese fired SAMs against TF 77 aircraft. It was precisely the air battle scenario the Son Tay raid planners hoped for.

The Navy was winding down its diversionary operation, and enemy defenses began paying attention to the Air Force intruders in the west. All Navy attack tracks funneled toward point BUDWEISER, from which each aircraft would return to its own carrier. Bardshar in the Combat Information Center and Ramage, still in his own war room, were satisfied that all TF 77 aircraft were returning safely. All twenty SAMs fired against the

Navy aircraft missed their targets. There was no AAA damage. All aircraft stayed out of harm's way.

Return to the Carriers

Coming home would be challenging and exciting. It always was. Carriers never stand still. They are always on the move and sail into the wind at about 15 knots during aircraft operations. This helps to reduce aircraft landing velocity by the amount of the carrier's forward speed through the water. Any amount of headwind is welcomed because it reduces the relative landing approach speed that much more. The landing portion of the carrier deck is not aligned along the ship's longitudinal axis. It is angled from the stern to the left at 14 degrees, and it is much shorter than the length of the ship. This way, if any aircraft goes off the landing deck into the drink, it falls off to the left and the forward-moving carrier does not run over it.

To get their planes on the deck for a successful tail hook landing, pilots have to touch down at the leading edge of the deck runway in a space that is only two hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. That would be difficult enough if this small deck area were motionless. But this floating runway moves forward into the wind at the carrier's speed in the water, and they have to land in the direction that is offset from the longitudinal axis of the carrier by 14 degrees. That runway orientation poses an additional challenge to the landing skills of pilots. They do have a good angle-of-attack indicator in their cockpit and can control their airspeed with proper throttle power application. Once they are in their ship's landing pattern, the Carrier Air Traffic Control Center provides them with the carrier's prevailing wind across the deck. But that is not all. Each carrier is subjected to the existing sea conditions. Because of its enormous size, the carrier does not bob up and down and from side to side with the speed of a small cork. The ship is subjected to the same rhythmic gyrations of the sea but in a proportionately slower motion. These forces of nature add to the challenges of a carrier landing. Now consider landing at night on an open sea when there is no visible horizon (no city lights to assist in determining one's own particular orientation); the challenge, or thrill of the ride, is increased tremendously. Earlier studies on Vietnam War air combat showed that pilots landing on carriers at night undergo greater stress than they do in attacks by AAA or SAMs during bomb runs on targets. Medical research revealed that the vital signs of tested pilots registered twice the amount

of stress "confronting the meatball" in a night carrier landing as over downtown Hanoi in daylight attacks.[27]

It was going to be a tough time for all who returned to their carriers that night. Their encounters with the "meatball" would become the second most memorable event of their mission. The ball is a visual precision landing instrument for carrier pilots. It is a yellow beam from Fresnel lenses aligned along the glide slope of an aircraft that is descending for a landing. It is gyro stabilized for the ship's pitch and roll and has a set of horizontal lights used as a reference. When pilots see that the yellow ball is even with the green datum lights, their aircraft is on the correct glide slope. If the ball goes below the green lights, it turns orange, and then red, if the aircraft is dangerously low. The ever-present landing signal officer is a human backup for the meatball and often provides verbal guidance to the pilots, helping them to land where they can engage the cables or waving them off if their approach is not a safe one. The LSOs grade each landing approach, which is also captured on film and available for a later critique.

When Bull Durham returned to the USS *Oriskany* from his BARCAP mission, he had yet another concern as a safety officer: "The recovery that night was weird. I had seen flight decks pitch, heave, and roll, but never anything like this. The fantail was describing a figure 8, with a slide from side-to-side superimposed on the roll and yaw. Most of us got a courtesy look—one wave off—and trapped on the next pass. Interestingly, all the aircraft on *Oriskany* got back aboard, but the big-decked *Ranger* sent a passel of aircraft into Da Nang that night."[28]

Jim Oliver and Joe Cole had an additional landing challenge ahead of them. Joe was returning for a night landing without his radios. Jim led him down to the final approach of the up-and-down pitching and side-to-side weaving *Oriskany,* ensuring that he made a successful arrested landing. That night's landing signal officer was C. W. Gilluly, who still remembers these landings. Oliver used so much fuel assisting Cole that he needed to replenish his tanks before attempting his own landing. He wanted to have enough fuel for several missed approaches if they became necessary. Red Crown at the USS *Wainwright* vectored him to Al Erderland's A-7 for a hook-up. Jim returned to his carrier's landing pattern and made a successful trap.

The last one off and the last one back on the deck of *Oriskany* was Jack Connell in his A-7 tanker:

> The weather back at the ship had continued to worsen, but everyone eventually got aboard. I was the last aircraft to land and had to be talked

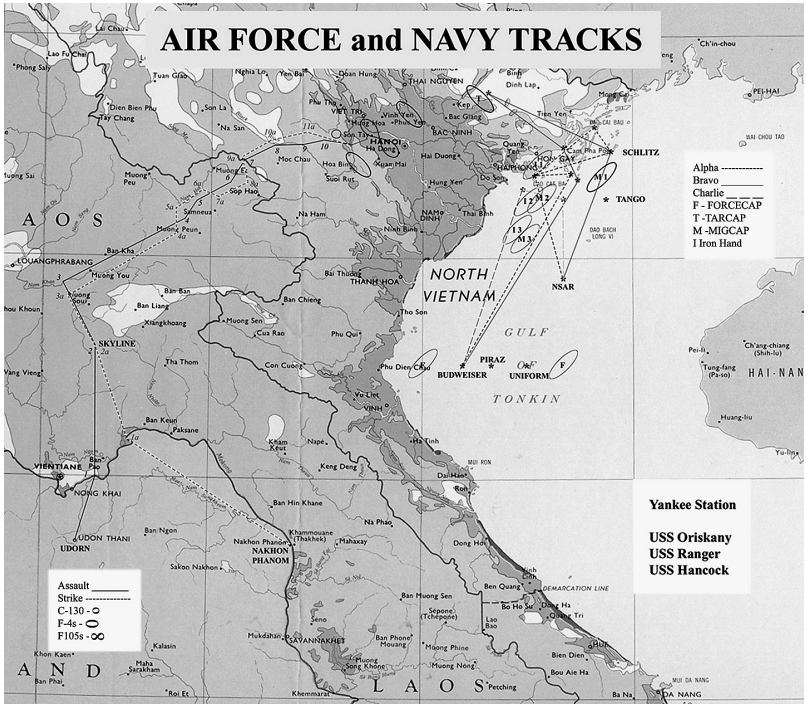
down by the LSO because the deck was pitching outside the stabilization limits of the lens and it was also heaving. I must have flown a pretty good instrument approach and broke out with a centered ball. The ball started to go a little low and I came on with some power. The LSO said the deck was pitching, to ignore the ball and "keep coming." The LSO talked me down with power and line-up calls, but the ball went even lower, then to a red ball, then a flashing red ball which scared the hell out of me (again, glad I went to church that day!). I trapped on my first shot at the deck and got an "OK" grade from the LSO.[29]

The View from Monkey Mountain

Everyone at the Monkey Mountain Command Post began to watch the Gulf of Tonkin display screen when the Navy tankers from Da Nang appeared in its monitored airspace. Task Force 77 carrier fighters were soon expected to begin their diversionary attacks. Manor's staff knew the overland flight path of the raiders, but no one had seen the Navy's diversion plans charted on a map. There were aircraft all over the place. With so many screens full of air activity, the scene was hard to follow. They saw the flare-dropping fighters headed north of Haiphong toward the clearly defined and forbidden buffer zone with China. Others were zigzagging east of Haiphong, and then there was a distinct track of low-flying aircraft that were simulating mining of the harbor. Before long, all of these aircraft established their distinct tracks and orbits, but anyone who did not pay continuous attention to this air activity would only see too many aircraft going in all directions.

While the number of aircraft over the Gulf dazzled the staff, Udorn's radar lost tracking of the raider formations. They were already in their low-level penetration tracks through the mountains into North Vietnam. Most of Manor's staff members did not realize that the radar targets, which continued to creep through the mountains, were based on flight plans that Homer Willett had programmed into the center's computer. Once the radars on Monkey Mountain and the Navy in the Gulf picked up the formations descending into the basin of the Red and Black Rivers, the computer generation ceased and Homer informed his friend, the center's battle commander, that this whole operation was designed to rescue POWs from Son Tay.

The center was too busy for the word to spread to those monitoring



Tracks flown by Air Force raiders from bases in Thailand and by Navy diversionary attack aircraft from the Gulf of Tonkin. (Computer scan photo of a Southeast Asia map with overprint by John Gargus)

their assigned stations. No one had ever seen such heavy nighttime activity. There were problems with the new equipment and displays that they were using for the first time. They expected to receive direct download data from the Air Force EC-121 that would be just like the data from the Navy's tactical data system. But there was something wrong. They were sure that the problem was on board the Connie. All systems at the center seemed to be okay.

The newly modified College Eye system did not function as expected. The IFF processing equipment showed immediate problems, which continued throughout the mission. M. Sgt. Gary L. Walker and his two radar technicians tried in vain to rectify the nagging situation. They checked and double-checked the IFF threshold settings and even replaced the suspected IFF interrogator with a spare. Nothing seemed to work. Captain Edney was not getting proper displays. The new system's radar monitors

experienced unprecedented noise strobing and displayed range-like concentric circles.[30] The Navy's jamming of enemy radars with six EKA-3B aircraft was intensive and very detrimental to the efforts of radar technicians on the C-121 trying to rectify their problem. Their mission continued despite their questionable capability to provide vectoring information for the MIGCAP and Wild Weasel aircraft that flew protective air cover for the raiders. Fortunately, the North Vietnamese reacted as the planners expected. They made a commitment to SAM defense and were no longer expected to launch their MIG interceptors.

While everyone was amazed at the numbers of aircraft the Navy committed to the diversion, Homer Willett was concerned about the plight of his College Eye EC-121T. This was to be the day when the Air Force reached the same degree of electronic sophistication that the Navy already possessed in the Gulf. Manor's battle staff had plenty to look at from a variety of sources and did not have much time to dwell on the problems the C-121 Frog Two was experiencing. The USS *Wainwright* had Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone and was feeding the command post the kind of real time radar data that the new EC-121T was supposed to provide. Radar technicians concluded that the Air Force problem was due to radar jamming by the Navy. Frog Two's problem forced Willett to rely on intelligence from the center's translators of North Vietnamese voice communications as he monitored the MIG threat. With so many aircraft and radio frequencies used by the raiders, the airwaves buzzed with all kinds of transmissions once the initial radio silence was broken.

Meanwhile, the mood on Frog Two became very somber. Technicians felt frustrated by the persistent problems they were experiencing. Those in the cockpit and the ones who could peek out every now and then witnessed a spectacular display of Navy air power that harmlessly harassed North Vietnam with its fake attacks and blinding flare drops. They could see and perhaps even count the twenty SAMs that were fired without effect on the aircraft over the Gulf. The Son Tay area was too far beyond well-illuminated Hanoi, but much later they could see some arching SAMs in the night sky that were fired against the USAF F-4s and F-105s.

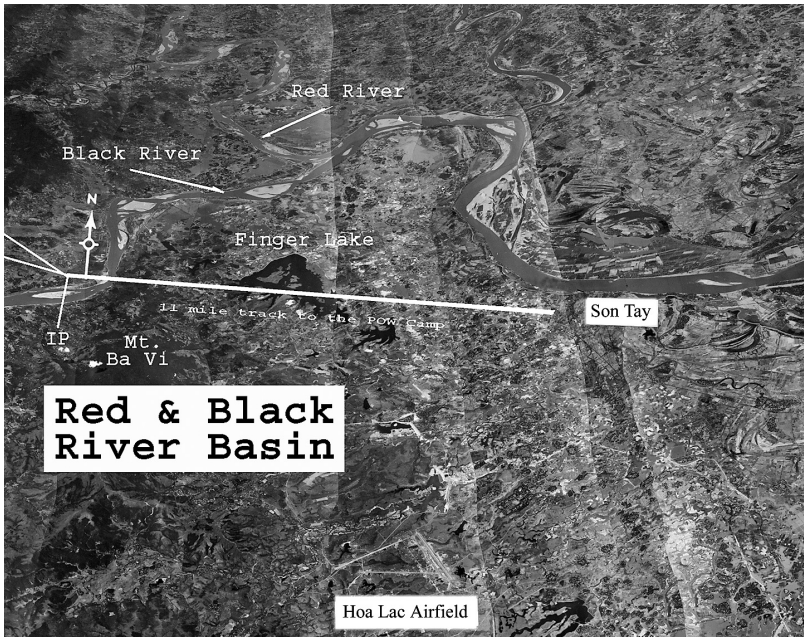
Entry into the Target Area

Cherry Two began its descent into the basin of the Red and Black Rivers after crossing turning point 11a. Ahead of us was the most heavily de-

fended area of North Vietnam. It was saturated with SA-2 surface-to-air missile sites and every type of antiaircraft artillery. On top of that, each military installation had air raid shelter trenches with antiaircraft small arms positions that would be manned during air raid alerts. Soldiers on high alert would shoot at everything within their sight, making the airspace unsafe at any altitude. It was definitely the deadliest sky one could encounter during daylight hours. However, we planned on their posture being different at night. The North Vietnamese would have to rely on radar guidance for their missiles and heavy antiaircraft artillery. We in our Combat Talon and the high flyers above us could monitor their tracking radars and be forewarned of their hostile intents. Were the North Vietnamese also forewarned about our low-level intrusion? Were we detected and their defensive antiaircraft batteries just ahead waiting for us? We would soon find out. Up to that point, all indications were that our formations had not been spotted. Enemy radars seemed to concentrate on the Navy in the east and on our newly arrived high flying MIGCAP F-4s and Wild Weasel F-105s. This was exactly the type of air defense reaction we anticipated in our air operations planning.

The view of the river basin ahead was spectacular. Those in the cockpit outside our curtained-off area were making comments about sights that appeared in front of them. Most were about the amount of light from Son Tay to Hanoi and beyond and about the amount of flooding in the river basin below. We did not expect the high level of either. I could not see the lights, but my radar showed water far beyond the amount in the intelligence update on floods we received just before the mission. The Finger Lake's shape was still recognizable, but in its dimensions it was at least twice its mapped size. The rivers were much wider, and even the Song Con River that flowed by the prison wall was clearly discernible on my radar. The most prominent feature on top of my radar screen was the clearly defined shape of Son Tay's old citadel. With that prominent manmade landmark I would have no problem putting our aircraft on track even without the assistance of other crew members. I was also surprised how accurate my drawings of anticipated area radar returns were. With the exception of more expansive water coverage, geographical features showed as I had envisioned them. Adding to our comfort were periodic reports from David Kender that the North Vietnamese early warning radars were scanning the airspace routinely, suggesting that we had not yet been detected.

Our initial point (IP) at the edge of a small dammed-up lake was discern-



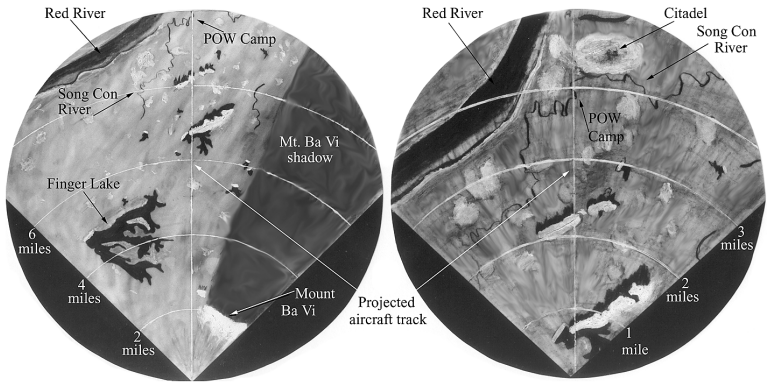
Composite high-altitude SR-71 photograph of Son Tay and the confluence of the Red and Black Rivers showing the eleven-mile flight path between the initial point and the POW camp. (USAF photo with overprint by John Gargus)

ible on my radar and was also clearly visible to everyone in the cockpit. In normal operations it is important to cross the initial point, make an accurate update of navigational systems, and then fly a carefully controlled final course to the objective area. To gain more time we intentionally drifted to the left of the planned course. We agreed to turn abeam of the IP when we passed to the north of it and intercept our inbound track to Son Tay almost three miles to the east. This shortcut would gain us about one minute and bring us to within thirty seconds of the desired two-minute separation from the helicopters. We no longer worried about the A-1E Peaches we were escorting. They could see the same sights that our cockpit crew observed, and they knew the terrain below very well from their own mission preparation. We would leave them abeam of the IP at three thousand feet. From there we would descend to fifteen hundred feet and continue on our own airdrop and communications monitoring mission.

I remember that I tried to locate the helicopter formation in the vicinity of the IP. Their spinning blades should have given me good reflective

OBJECTIVE AREA RADAR TARGET PREDICTIONS

10 Mile Range **5 Mile Range**



The author prepared these two radar prediction sketches for the objective area. APQ-115 radar showed these types of presentations when used in its mapping mode. (Sketches by John Gargus)

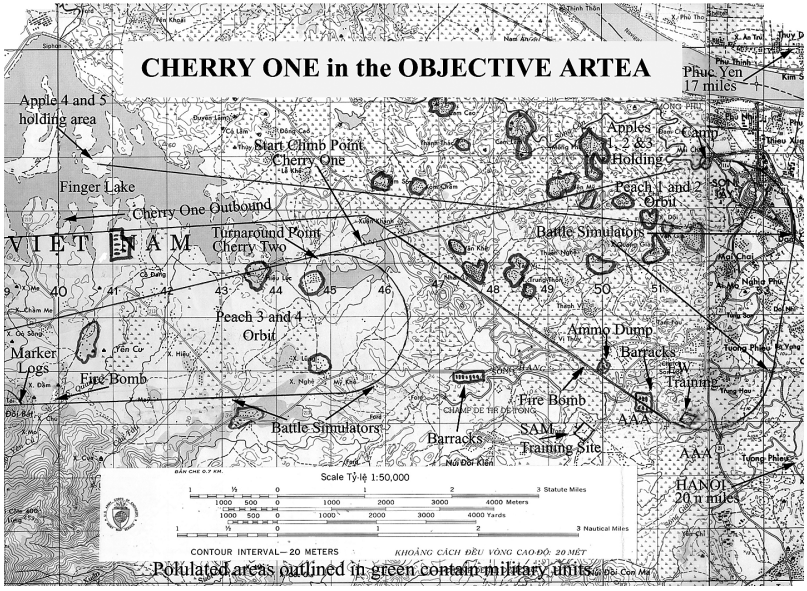
targets, but I could not spot them even after I triggered their specially installed radar transponders. That was odd because these transponders were supposed to be our best navigational aids for relocating them after a formation breakup. I also tried one other thing. Capt. Jack Knops gave me the frequency of the Son Tay low-frequency radio beacon. I could not pick that one up, either.

Then, at 2:14 A.M., we passed abeam of our crucial common checkpoint. Norm Mazurek called the IP to be one and a half miles to the right of our position. I quickly adjusted my Doppler cross-track and distance-to-go counters while we made a slight left-hand turn to converge on our final inbound course toward Son Tay. We began to run our airdrop checklist. We descended to sixteen hundred feet (fifteen hundred feet above ground level), slowed to 130 knots, and lowered the ramp. Peach One and Peach Two remained at three thousand feet. They maintained their 145-knot airspeed and surged ahead of us. They would reach Son Tay just seconds after the flare drops over the prison compound. Peaches Three and Four also passed ahead of us, but they would establish their holding orbit about five miles short of Son Tay and to the west of our napalm firebomb markers.

Maj. John C. Squires and Capt. William R. Sutton, who flew in the

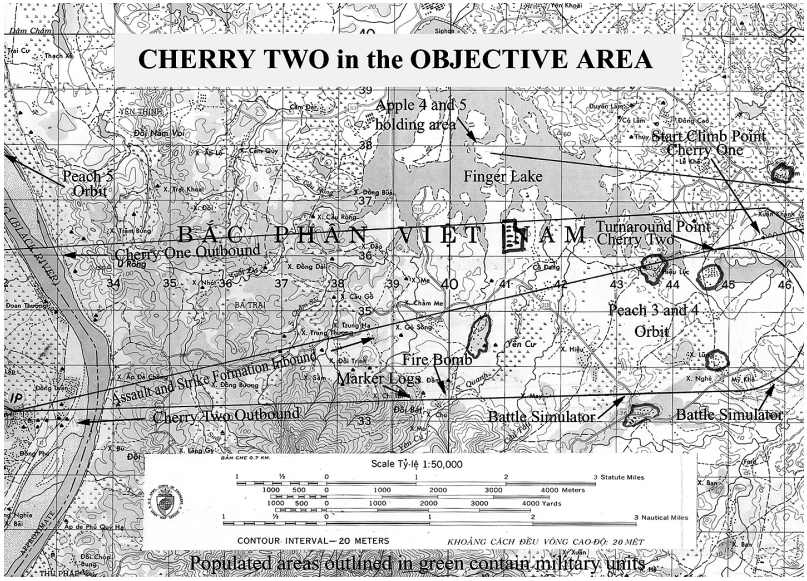
spare Peach Five, were the only ones who reported seeing some parachute flares dropped by the Navy aircraft east of Hanoi. They established their holding orbit north of the IP at thirty-five hundred feet. We must have been too far, too low, and too preoccupied in our cockpits to see the Navy's fireworks display.

We soon converged on our final inbound course, and I had the citadel and Song Con River at the proper bearings. Bill Stripling confirmed our on-course position, and I made my final distance-to-go Doppler update. Then, with exactly twenty-five seconds before our procedure right turn back to the IP, we heard Capt. Bill Guenon, copilot of Cherry One exclaim, "Alpha, Alpha, Alpha." That was the call for the flare release over the prison compound. The raid was on! It was about half a minute past 2:18 A.M. when I checked my watch and recorded the time in my log. Bill Guenon could not resist a friendly rib directed at Cherry Two. He pronounced the code words "Alpher, Alpher, Alpher," mimicking our Harry Pannill's Virginian accent that we had heard so many times in Florida when our crew flew as Cherry One.



The flight path of Cherry One, with its drop sequence and positions of friendly and enemy forces. (Computer scan photo of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers map with overprint by John Gargus)

We crossed our checkpoint four miles short of the prison compound and began a 15-degree bank turn to the right with a roll-out heading back to the IP. My next Doppler stage was set to 270.7 degrees for 6.9 miles with a 1.4 mile offset to the right of our track. That way, once we rolled out on our proper heading, our cross-track would be zeroed out and we would have the correct distance to go to the IP. Our airdrops did not demand the precision accuracy that was so important for those of Cherry One. We never even practiced Cherry Two drops at Eglin. Our battle simulators, napalm firebomb markers, and log flares were supposed to be dropped in the vicinity of road intersections along our flight track. There were several building complexes along these roads. Lt. Jim Brinson circled them on our objective area maps to indicate that they contained military facilities. Soldiers from these complexes would be the ones most likely to be called upon to assist the defenders of Son Tay. We dropped two napalm markers and battle simulators in their immediate neighborhood to delay their response. Some of our diversionary fireworks continued popping off a long time after the raiders departed from Son Tay.



This map of the objective area shows the flight path of Cherry Two from the initial point (IP) back to the IP, with drop locations for battle simulators and napalm firebomb markers. (Computer scan photo of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers map with overprint by John Gargus)

Helicopters in the Objective Area

Cherry One arrived at the Assault Formation's planned breakup point three and a half miles out of Son Tay at five hundred feet above ground level, broke radio silence, and broadcast a final heading to the POW camp. This heading of 072 degrees compensated for the wind drift as well as for the location of their formation breakup point, which turned out to be 150 yards to the right of their intended inbound track. Then Cherry One accelerated to 130 knots and climbed to fifteen hundred feet above ground level for the illumination flare drop over the camp. Apples Four and Five followed in trail. They were to drop flares over the camp if the ones delivered by the C-130 failed to go off. All went well. Four good flares lit up the night, and the backup helicopters reversed their course to land on an island in the "Finger Lake." They would wait there with engines idling for a call to pick up rescued prisoners or raiders. Cherry One continued flying a carefully orchestrated procedure turn, dropping battle simulators at a road intersection and a bridge over the Song Con River and the napalm firebomb marker near a known ammunition storage area. With this done, Cherry One descended to a terrain-following altitude and flew to an orbit in northern Laos. From this orbit its crew would assist helicopters and fighters on their return to Thailand by providing them with UHF direction-finding steers.

After Cherry One sped up and began its climb to fifteen hundred feet above ground level, Apple Three became the helicopter lead ship and the V-shaped Assault Formation maneuvered to shift into an in-trail formation. Maj. Frederic "Marty" Donohue descended to about five hundred feet (two hundred feet above the ground) and followed a 072-degree magnetic course to the POW camp as predicted by the C-130 navigator. He also slowed down to 80 knots. By opting to fly at the same speed as the other helicopters, he hoped to ensure that they would not lose sight of each other and that his spatial separation from the accelerated Cherry One would increase to almost one mile by the time of the flare drop.

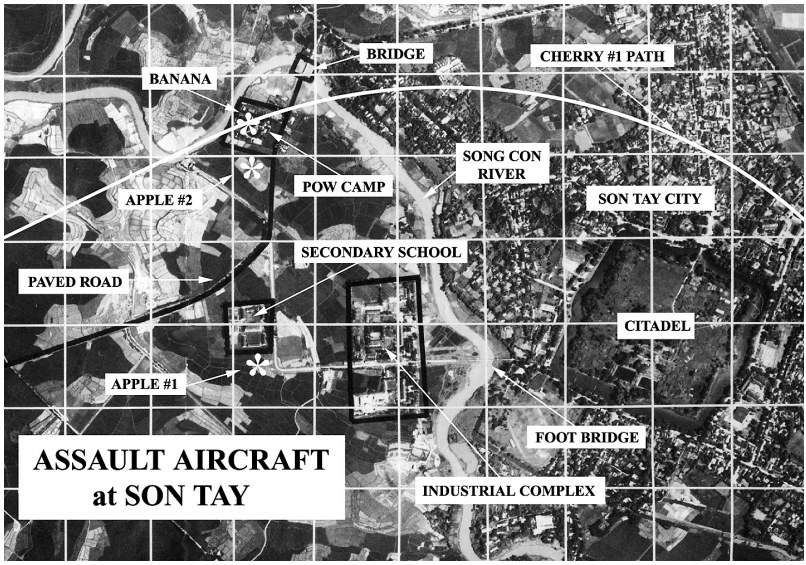
Marty flew in the lead of the new in-trail helicopter formation and checked periodically with his tail gunner, S. Sgt. Angus W. Sowell, to confirm that Banana and the rest were still behind them. When Cherry One's "Alpha, Alpha, Alpha" call broke the radio silence, they saw four two-million-candlepower flares explode in rapid succession and brighten up the sleepy countryside. It was almost as light as day in a

cone several miles square beneath the lights that descended slowly from fifteen hundred feet. Trees and scattered clumps of buildings cast long eerie shadows in all directions. Parachute flares were strung out just to the left of their flight, hinting that they had drifted slightly south of the desired course. Marty looked away from the flares and thought that he saw the camp through his right window. He initiated a slow turn to the right toward that complex. His copilot, Capt. Thomas R. Waldron, corrected him, telling him that the Song Con River, which ran by the camp, was just off their left side window. Marty agreed and began a slow correcting turn to the left that would put them on the north side of the river from where he could begin aiming his gunship for an assault approach to the POW camp. He had to fly across the camp in a southeasterly direction midway between its two guard towers. Then, while he was focusing on his final approach, his helicopter main transmission warning light came on, signaling an emergency that required immediate landing. This was no time for emergency checklist procedures. His target was already clearly in sight. He instructed Tom to break the distracting warning light and ordered the gunners to continue with their well-rehearsed duties.[31]

Marty slowed down for a firing pass and crossed the river at almost walking speed. His mini gunners opened up on the guard towers with a steady stream of bullets, which splintered the wooden structures. Every other bullet of their four thousand rounds per minute was a fiery tracer. The southwest tower collapsed. Then Marty maneuvered his ship to the right so that the gunners could strafe the guard barracks and administration buildings with their left and rear mini guns. The thatched roof of the barracks caught fire from the stream of tracer bullets. After that, Apple Three made a left-hand turn around the camp and headed north to find a landing and engine-running holding area where Apples One and Two could join them. The two would wait there for a call to return to the camp to pick up rescued POWs. Apple Three was going to be the last one to leave. Marty and his crew would wait for orders to pick up any additional POWs or members of the rescue force who had not departed in Apple One or Two.

Banana

In spite of our careful planning for the last three and a half miles of flight into Son Tay and my earlier personal assurances to Colonel Simons that



This photograph shows Cherry One's airdrop path and the landing locations of Banana, Apple One, and Apple Two. (USAF photo overprinted by the Joint Contingency Task Group and John Gargus)

we had a foolproof plan for getting everyone to the right target, things did not turn out that way. Banana's pilot, Maj. Herbert D. Kalen, recalls the following: "After the C-130 left the formation, I flew a heading of 072 degrees. My focus was to find the camp. There was enough separation from the other helicopters that I was not concerned with flying a 'good' formation. Although there were flares, I don't remember ever seeing the HH-53. Shortly after the C-130 left the formation, I perceived a square like building structure, which in my mind was the POW camp although it was right of course. I was anxious to get on the ground so Captain Meadows and his crew could do their thing."[32]

Two minutes from the Son Tay camp Capt. Meadows ordered his men to get ready. Designated gunners assumed their shooting positions. 1Lt. George Petrie and MSgt. Thomas J. Kemmer, armed with CAR-15s, were the right door gunners. Petrie was standing up and Kemmer was lying down against the front edge of the door. MSgt. "Pappy" Kittleson took up his position with an M-60 machine gun at the left side window. MSgt. Billy K. Moore and Sgt. Patrick St. Clair, both armed with CAR-15s, lay flat on the lowered helicopter ramp. Moore was on the right

Blueboy Group on final assault rehearsal. The first three men on the left are Capt. Richard J. Meadows, M. Sgt. Galen C. Kittleson, and Sgt. John J. Lippert. On the right are Sgt. Patrick St. Clair, Capt. Dan H. McKinney, S. Sgt. Kenneth McMullin, S. Sgt. Charles G. Erickson, Sgt.1C William L. Tapley, and Capt. Thomas W. Jaeger. (USAF photo)

and St. Clair on the left. Their long-awaited moment arrived. St. Clair records it as follows:

> MSG Billy K. Moore and myself were tasked to lay [*sic*] on the tail ramp and fire on the guard towers as we approached the camp. The mini guns were supposed to take them out, but as insurance we also were to fire on them. The northwest tower was on my side of the aircraft as we approached and "Billy K." covered the southwest tower from his side. We got into position a couple of minutes out. As soon as we approached the first compound, the mini gun opened up on the northwest corner of the compound although no tower was there. Since I was a product of good training, I also emptied a magazine from my carbine into the non-existent tower. I did a quick magazine exchange and braced for the landing. However, we

> momentarily flared and then took off with full pitch and torque that almost sucked me out of the chopper; luckily, SFC Lorenzo Robbins' ("Robby's") job was to hold me in the aircraft by my ankles and he did so superbly. A few moments later we came in on the real camp.[33]

When Banana approached the compound for a landing, Kalen and Zehnder realized that they were at the wrong site. The tree line did not look right and the courtyard was incredibly small. Before they could do anything about their error, some of the Blueboy gunners began firing from the flaring aircraft. Kalen applied power and spun his helicopter around toward the real POW camp, which was now behind them just a few seconds away. This is how Kalen remembers this event:

> The school came into our immediate focus but as soon as I flared and came to very momentary hover, I realized there was no clearing into which I could land. I also realized exactly where I was and knew exactly where the POW camp was. I applied maximum power, turned a sharp left and then a sharp right and as I rolled out from my right turn, the camp was directly in front of me, which was the first time I actually saw the camp. Almost instantaneously, I performed a flare to slow my speed for the landing. All this occurred in a matter of seconds.[34]

Can anyone blame the Banana pilots or the shooters for assaulting the wrong building complex? They trained against a cloth outline of the camp in Florida where it took some imagination to convert the fabric outlines into actual walled-in buildings. The "Secondary School" complex was of the same size and of the same geometric configuration as the POW camp mockup they practiced against at Eglin. Even though there were differences in the appearances of actual buildings in the two compounds, the aircrews did not have the benefit of having seen them from the air before. They had to imagine the appearance of actual buildings from their viewing of the compound model Barbara. The Banana pilots anticipated a very difficult landing and focused their attention on the tree line inside the approaching compound and did not pay attention to the surrounding countryside. And how about the shooters? As far as they were concerned, their moment had just arrived and they proceeded to empty their magazine into the corners of the walls where the guard towers should have been. Apple Three was supposed to have attacked the towers first.

Perhaps its gunners had already destroyed them with very precise mini gunfire. Before anyone could analyze what had happened, all gunners reloaded their weapons and were ready for another airborne assault against the real guard towers at the POW camp.

Greenleaf

Apple One, with twenty-two members of the Greenleaf Group, followed Banana. Once Apple One's pilots saw that Blueboy's gunners fired at what they believed was their intended target, they focused their attention on putting down in the designated Greenleaf landing zone. This was a spot in a rice field due south of a rectangular building that had been identified as guard billets. Such a building was there, and the left door gunner, M. Sgt. Harold W. Harvey, opened up on it with his mini gun. He tried to put as many rounds on target as he could before the eager raiders disembarked and moved toward their assigned targets within his line of fire.

Several raiders glanced through the lowered ramp door during their pre-landing preparation while their helicopter made a gradual turn to the south. They were startled at what they saw. The lit-up terrain behind them showed the river and the POW camp about two hundred yards past them. Didn't the pilots see that? Did they fly right by it? Then within seconds the Air Force gunners opened up with their Gatling guns and they were landing.

Capt. Glenn R. Rouse stood beside Air Force gunner Harvey. He also glanced at the correct target when the helicopter made a gradual right-hand turn to the south and might have been the first man to realize that they were landing in the wrong target area. He led the Demolition Element that was to advance through the camp to blow up the bridge over the Song Con River. He knew his route well, not only from the repeated practice sessions but also from his study of photographs and the model Barbara, which vividly depicted all the buildings his men had to clear. What he observed on the descent did not look like his targeted sector. The guard billets on the right that were assigned to Capt. Udo Walther's Security Element looked okay, but the sector of the camp that belonged to his men was all wrong. They were supposed to advance north past the water well and clear two connected buildings just east of the wall that were suspected to contain the kitchen and the guards' mess hall. Then they were to make contact with Petrie's Blueboy Element at the east gate

and clear the small administrative building on the right. With that done, they could proceed through the open field to the bridge.[35] He did not see the POW compound wall. Instead of the kitchen and the mess hall there was one large north-to-south rectangular building, and the suspected small administrative building was a two-story structure with startled occupants looking out the windows at what was happening outside their courtyard.

There was nothing Captain Rouse could do. The helicopter settled to the ground, and all men dispersed on long practiced routes toward their designated targets. Capt. Udo H. Walther, who commanded the Greenleaf Group and also led a six-man Security Element, rushed to assault the guard barracks building. Capt. Eric J. Nelson's Security Element moved to the right of the camp to secure the road that went north to the bridge. Their targets and routes seemed okay at first, so they advanced as rehearsed. Rouse's men saw the same scene he observed just before the landing and knew instantly that they were not supposed to be there. There was a big two-story building straight ahead that appeared to be full of disturbed and agitated enemy who began shooting at the raiders from several windows. Their only available cover was a ditch that might have been used as an air raid shelter trench. Rouse ordered everyone to get down on the ground and wait for the helicopter that would surely return to get them out of there.

Col. Bull Simons, who was in their midst, understood Rouse's predicament and agreed with his decision to hold the men in place. Meanwhile, some of the confused enemy soldiers were running through the courtyard, while others were shooting wildly at the raiders from several windows. Sgt. 1C Leroy N. Carlson, M-79 gunner from Rouse's Demolition Element, witnessed the perilous scene developing in the courtyard and took the matter in his own hands. He advanced forward and used his M-79 to lob grenades at the big building. This structure had five windows on the top floor and four on the bottom with a door used by the enemy to run in and out. Carlson believes that he fired twenty-six grenades through its windows and door.[36] Sgt. 1C Vladimir "Jake" Jakovenko joined Carlson with his M-60 machine gun and fired bursts at the windows and enemy in the yard. This duo kept the enemy away from the windows and protected Captain Walther's men, who were clearing the southeast corner building that looked just like building 7B, the guard billets at Son Tay.

Capt. Udo Walther's Security Element did not pause to examine the site from the landing zone. Their target building was right there.

Udo moved swiftly around the east end of the building along with his radioman, Sgt. 1C Salvador M. Suarez, and Sgt. 1C David A. Lawhon Jr., and began clearing it just as they rehearsed it in Florida. They threw concussion grenades through the windows and shot at everyone exiting and running here and there through the courtyard. Things did not seem right from the start. There was a big building in the center of the yard with people firing from the windows. They realized that they were in the wrong place, but now they had a new job to do. Before they could get back to the helicopter landing zone, they had to eliminate the enemy their presence had stirred up. So they continued moving westward, with Lawhon entering each room and making sure that all opposition was subdued.[37] S. Sgt. Robert L. Nelson, with Sgt. 1C Daniel Jurich and Sgts. Gary D. Keel and Franklin D. Roe, approached the building from the other end. Nelson realized as soon as he reached the northwest corner of his building that they were in the wrong place.[38] But he was faced with the same predicament as Udo's trio on the other side of the building. Enemy soldiers, who appeared to be physically larger than typical North Vietnamese soldiers, were coming out of the buildings. They ran erratically, seeking safety in other structures of the courtyard. They did not appear to be North Vietnamese. All seemed much taller and bulkier than the Vietnamese men our troops had encountered on their prior tours in the country. They brought them down with accurate fire and tossed concussion grenades through the barracks windows and doors. They all welcomed the sounds of exploding grenades that Carlson placed in every window of the large building and of "Jake" Jakovenko's M-60 machine gun fire. With his M-16 in hand, Jurich joined the two and together they quieted the scene and made it possible for all of Udo's men to withdraw without sustaining any injuries.

Capt. Eric J. Nelson's Support Element was to secure the buildings and the road east of the camp that ran to the Song Con River bridge. They exited on the right-hand side of the helicopter and crossed in front of it on their way to the corner of the camp where they found the road. The road headed north along the camp all right, but it was not the one they had practiced securing. This one had a right-angle turn that headed east to the town and the footbridge to the citadel. It also had a number of large buildings at the curve and farther east of it. Nelson stopped his element and established a defensive position at the curve.[39]

Captain Nelson recalls the following:

> I was on the ramp with SFC Donald E. Taapken who was first and I was right behind him at the helicopter's ramp hinge. All I could see was the Redwine's aircraft and the ground behind us. As soon as I got off the helicopter, I saw the Redwine helicopter flying over top of us rather than landing behind us. As we moved to the right of our helicopter, I could see the right hand bend in the road, which led to the "light industrial facility" (chemical/fertilizer plant?). Also there were no buildings on the east side of the road, except a bombed out temple north of the school compound near the road intersection. As the lead Forward Air Guide and Assistant Air Ground coordinator (Colonel Simons' backup), I had memorized the aerial photos and the kill boxes. I knew we were 400 meters south of the target and at the "Secondary School."[40]

Throughout this engagement, Bull Simons and his two radio operators, S. Sgts. David S. Nickerson and Walter L. Miller, maintained contact with Ground Force Commander Bud Sydnor at Son Tay, with the A-1E aircraft above, and, through the high-flying radio relay aircraft over the Gulf of Tonkin, with Brigadier General Manor at Monkey Mountain. Greenleaf Group commander Udo Walther was tied up clearing the suspected guard billets, so Bull filled in, doing what needed to be done. He promptly called for the helicopter to return.

The original assault plan called for the A-1E Peaches to drop white phosphorus bombs on the footbridge from the military garrison at the citadel to the complex just south of the Son Tay camp. Now that Greenleaf found itself on the western edge of this complex, it was doubly important to deny anyone access across the footbridge. The road from it led directly to Greenleaf's landing zone and Captain Nelson's defensive position. Peach One with Maj. Jerry Rhein dropped one white phosphorus bomb at the western edge of the bridge, splattering a hot burning pattern on its western edge. Major Gochnauer in Peach Two followed up by dropping another one just west of the splash area of Jerry Rhein's bomb. This one was short and ignited a building with some chemicals, which produced bright green flames that added to the eeriness of the night. When panicking individuals began running out of the building heading in several directions, Captain Nelson's element responded by firing warning shots that forced the escapees across the road toward the south and away from the main body of the raiders. With the footbridge on fire, they would have to go a long way to report that they were under attack.

Withdrawal from the Secondary School was well disciplined. Apple One returned about four minutes after its first landing. Captain Rouse's element was ready for immediate reboarding. Captain Nelson's element closed in on the landing zone from the east. Captain Walther's element disengaged from its attack on the camp and was the last to reach the helicopter. Throughout the reboarding process, Jake Jakovenko provided protective cover, firing menacing solid tracer rounds at the buildings with suspected live opponents. He began with nine hundred rounds of M-60 ammunition and used up about one-third of it from his kneeling position at the entrance to the camp and during his slow retreat toward the helicopter. His original role was to provide machine gun cover for Captain Rouse's bridge demolition team. He used only tracer bullets because of their visual effect on the enemy. The raiders wanted to be sure that anyone approaching the bridge was deterred by seeing that the area was under attack.[41] This same deterrent effect served well in this location. Even though the solid tracers pinpointed Jake's exact position for the enemy, he made all the building occupants aware that his firepower was superior to theirs. He made them hide and stay out of the range of his menacing bullets that ricocheted inside their buildings and throughout the courtyard. The same visual effect brought comfort to Udo Walther's men, who could see that they were being protected by friendly fire. It made their retreat to the helicopter that much safer. The helicopter crew was also relieved to see that the opposition was held in check. Jake remained so engrossed in what he was doing that Udo Walther had to drag him toward the waiting helicopter and out of the line of fire from the helicopter door and tail mini gunners who resumed strafing the structures and continued to do so throughout their departure for the Son Tay camp. Udo and Jake were the last two aboard.[42]

Blueboy

Banana's landing in the courtyard was more violent than anyone anticipated. This is how Blueboy's commander, Capt. Dick Meadows, recorded it in his after action report.

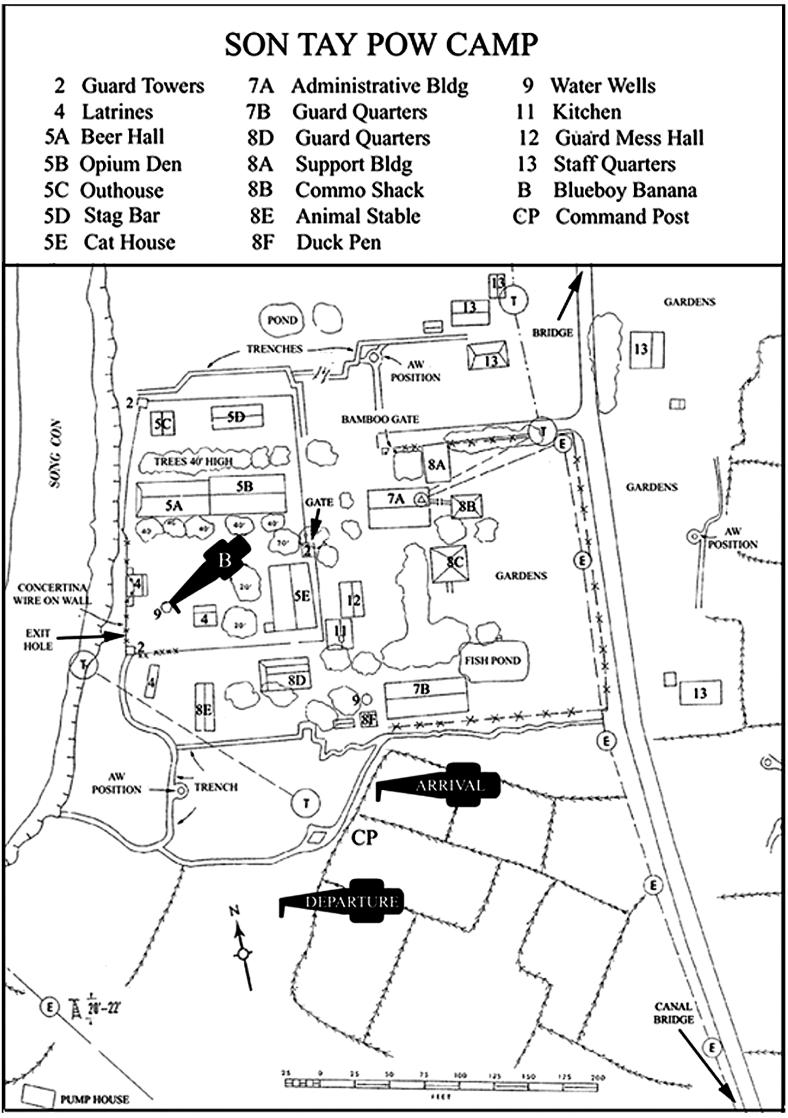
> As we neared the compound, we crossed the small river and saw tall trees along the west wall which the A/C (MAJ Kalen) had to hurdle, then began the landing procedures. All guns were firing. I saw the

> M-60 machine gun tracers hitting the northwest tower with great accuracy. As we began to descend into the compound area, the props of the helicopter began chopping the limbs from the trees and near the ground a large tree in front of 5E was completely severed. Limbs and debris were falling even after the men dismounted the helicopter. . . . Also the chopper gave a violent jerk to the right which threw one of the men out the right front door.[43]

Only the Air Force crew members and a few nonshooting raiders had their seat belts fastened during Banana's high risk landing. 1st Lt George Petrie was the man who inadvertently became the first man to hit the ground. He had just strafed the southwest guard tower from the right door and was fortunate to be tossed out far enough to the side to avoid getting squashed by the falling helicopter. Miraculously, none of the battle gear-laden Blueboy members got hurt. They were pelted with falling tree limbs, leaves, yard debris, and dust as they scrambled out of the helicopter to carry out their tasks in assigned areas of the POW compound. Air Force T. Sgt. Leroy M. Wright, Banana's flight engineer, was the only man who suffered a significant injury, which he completely ignored during the excitement of the moment. One fire extinguisher tore loose from the wall of the helicopter and smashed his ankle. He paid little attention to his pain until after he departed in Apple One for the return trip.

Sergeant Dodge's PRC-77 radio was knocked off the pre-set frequency by a falling tree limb. This caused some anxious moments because Meadows could not initiate immediate radio contact with Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor, whose call sign was "Wildroot." Once Dodge realized what had happened, he adjusted the frequency and established proper contact with the raid's ground commander.

Meanwhile, Dick Meadows, with a broadcasting bullhorn at his lips, was the first raider off the helicopter ramp. Crouching down amid the still falling tree branches, he began broadcasting a joyful message to the POWs: "We are Americans. . . . This is a rescue. Keep your heads down. We are here to get you out. We will soon enter your cells. We are Americans."[44] He paused before repeating those and similar words, but he heard no replies from the buildings inside the compound. His two Assault Element members, M. Sgt. Billy K. Moore and Sgt. 1C Anthony Dodge, rushed to attack the southwest tower. Their next task was to check out the camp's latrine, secure the southwest corner of the compound, and prepare to blow an exit hole in the wall just north of the demolished tower.



This figure shows the helicopter landing zones and identifies targeted camp buildings. (Joint Contingency Task Group sketch adjusted by John Gargus)

An empty two-man cell at the Son Tay camp. (USAF Joint Contingency Task Group photo, taken by Sgt. 1C Jerry W. Hill)

Capt. Dan H. McKinney's four-man Assault Element headed north. They split into pairs: Sgt. 1C Lorenzo "Robby" Robbins and Sgt. Patrick St. Clair ran toward the splintered northwest guard tower and pulverized it even more by emptying their CAR-15 magazines into it. Their presence on the north side of the compound flushed several soldiers from the two north buildings. They took off toward the gate, running between the east wall and building 5B, which the POWs had nicknamed the "Opium Den."[45] Both of them fired at the fleeing soldiers, who eventually ran into crossfire from Petrie's element at the gate. Robby and Pat had a few tense moments when two grenades came sailing over the wall and rolled harmlessly to a stop near their positions while they were clearing the two empty buildings in the north courtyard. These might have come from the guards who had found refuge in the north air shelter trench. If there were other grenades, they must have landed behind the buildings away from Robby and Pat. Because there were no explosions, they must all have been duds.[46] How fortunate that some of the Soviet supplied explosives used by the enemy were past their useful shelf life! In

the meantime, McKinney and "Pappy" Kittleson burst into building 5A (nicknamed the "Beer Hall") expecting to free the first American POWs. This was to be Pappy's fourth wartime prisoner rescue of his illustrious military career. They found all the doors open. There was no one inside.

When George Petrie got tossed out of the helicopter door, he landed on his feet. But his unexpected expulsion propelled him in the opposite direction from where he needed to go. He quickly reversed his course, shook the fallen tree twigs off his body, and rushed to the east gate. There was another guard tower there that was not attacked by mini guns from either helicopter. Little was known about this tower because the trees obscured it on all available intelligence photographs. As a result it was not accurately duplicated on the scale model Barbara. It was George's job to neutralize it and to guard the gate until Captain Rouse's Demolition Element from the Greenleaf Group reached it from the south on their way to the Song Con River bridge. His other team members, M. Sgt. Thomas J. Kemmer and Sgt. 1C Donald R. Wingrove, were to free the prisoners from the Opium Den (building 5B).

George was surprised to find the gate of the compound wide open. He was equally surprised at the sight of the guard tower. It was nothing like the others. He estimated it to be at least thirty-five feet high and about twenty feet wide across the base. It was not made of wood like the ones on the west wall. It was made of concrete and had a wall around the top. It appeared to be empty. George tossed a concussion grenade into its upper level and heard a scream as the explosion took out its hiding occupant. He then checked out the maximum-security cell that was located beneath the tower. It was open and empty. All along something seemed wrong. He did not hear any jubilant noises from inside the compound. As soon as he concealed himself in the moon shadows by the gate he heard CAR-15 shots from the north wall. Four enemy soldiers, flushed out by Robbins and St. Clair, emerged from behind the Opium Den and ran toward him. The first one was brandishing an AK-47. George Petrie and Tom Kemmer took them out with single well-placed shots. Tom was lying flat on the ground at the base of the Opium Den covering George while he was taking care of the guard tower. Then it was quiet in the compound until George noticed that one of the four downed enemy soldiers managed to struggle to his feet and lean against the wall of the building. He shouted a warning to Tom. Both of them shot him again with several well-aimed single shots.[47]

After this shootout Kemmer and Wingrove entered the Opium Den from the west side door. They found all the doors open and the cells

empty. Some cells showed evidence of being lived in by the soldiers. Their meager possessions and helmets were in plain sight. Kemmer was tempted to take one helmet as a souvenir, but his military discipline prevented him from picking it up. What if it was booby trapped like some of those he had encountered in prior engagements in South Vietnam?[48]

Capt. Thomas W. Jaeger's four-man assault element took on the southeast corner of the compound with the large building that we believed was used as the camp's interrogation and torture facility. The POWs called this building the "Cat House." S. Sgts. Kenneth E. McMullin and Charles G. Erickson provided cover for Jaeger, who began searching the building with Sgt. 1C William L. Tapley. When two enemy soldiers came out running from the corner of the Opium Den toward George Petrie at the east gate, Tapley and Erickson engaged them. Tapley downed the first one and Erickson stepped in to take care of the second one. This is how he recorded it in his after action summary:

> I moved around the downed tree to the south and then to the corner of 5E where Lt. Petrie and SFC Tapley were assaulting the east guard tower. Tapley was giving covering fire and his magazine was empty. He shouted this to Lt. Petrie who apparently did not hear him. As he was reloading and enemy soldier came running toward the east gate where Lt. Petrie was. I stepped around SFC Tapley and fired at the enemy putting him down.[49]

Jaeger and Tapley found the doors of the building locked. When they forced the doors open, they found the cells empty. Door locks were there to secure numerous bags of cement along with masonry and various other construction tools and materials.

Meanwhile, Petrie was listening to periodic shots being fired southeast of the gate. He was startled when four armed soldiers, flushed out by the Redwine Group, ran north along the wall past his defensive position. They ran very fast, but he managed to take down at least two of them. He could do no more without getting into the Redwine area outside the gate where he could become a friendly fire target. Not knowing that the operation had gone to Plan Green, he expected someone from the Greenleaf Group to show up at the gate shortly so that he could join Kemmer and Wingrove in their search of the Opium Den. Wingrove had made a preliminary check of the inside hallway of the cellblock to ensure that

there were no guards inside. He then came out to cover his two team members who had been doing all the shooting on the outside. After that there was a pause in the running of the guards. Petrie looked outside the gate and noticed that the small building beside what we believed to be the camp's headquarters (building 8B) was on fire. It must have been started by a round from one of the mini guns firing from the helicopters. Just at that time four guards emerged from the headquarters area and ran directly toward the gate. George shot at them from his shadowy position without realizing that Redwine Two was also firing at them from the south. Then, suspecting that there might be more soldiers in the headquarters building, he sprayed its windows with several bursts of semiautomatic fire. These bursts alerted Dick Meadows, who immediately questioned George why he was shooting in automatic bursts. Dick was in the middle of the compound monitoring the work of his assault elements, receiving incredible reports that there were no prisoners to be found in any of the buildings.[50]

Petrie informed Meadows that he would stay at the gate because no one from the Greenleaf Group had yet reached his location. Dick reminded him that the operation had been following Plan Green right from the start. The first report about Plan Green did not register with George because it came while he was preoccupied by his confrontation with enemy soldiers. Now he knew that it would be someone from Captain Turner's Security Element coming to the gate. Delay in their arrival made more sense now, and he would have to stay at the gate a while longer.

When Petrie heard from Meadows that the camp was empty, a very troubling thought invaded his mind. No American POWs! No Jim Hickerson! That was just too much after all they had gone through to get the job done. Meadows had wisely deflated his high hopes just before departure from Udorn by telling him that his cousin Hickerson was not one of the known POWs interned at Son Tay. That was bad enough to take. Now he had just learned that there were no American prisoners at all. He would have drawn some comfort had he known then that his cousin Jim was in the nearest North Vietnamese POW camp, whose inmates were awakened by the sounds of nighttime battle in the west. Accompanying aircraft noise and SAM launchings convinced Jim and his fellow inmates that a POW rescue was taking place.[51]

The scene inside the compound was incredible. No one believed what he saw and heard. "Negative items!" ("Item" was a code word for POW.)

This is how Meadows recorded it:

> I began to broadcast my message with the bullhorn to the detainees, but was interrupted by my first radio transmission from BLUEBOY ONE. Message was that 5A, 5C and 5D were clear with zero Items. I discontinued my broadcasting to notify WILDROOT. SFC Dodge's PRC-77 was knocked off frequency by the limb that hit him as he debarked the HH-3. After getting the frequency squared away, I transmitted the message to WILDROOT. I received a message from BLUEBOY TWO with HOLY SMOKE (Okay) and a negative count. BLUEBOY THREE then came up with a HOLY SMOKE and zero Items.[52]

That was impossible! As level-headed and reliant on his men as Meadows was, he asked them to repeat their initial reports and then urged them to search again. That stunning revelation and disbelief went all the way up the chain of command to the Monkey Mountain Command Post. Did everyone hear it right? As ridiculous as it may seem today, when the raiders were told to search the cells again, they did it in spite of the obvious results. They all hoped that the men they came to rescue would somehow reappear in their abandoned cells. McKinney was dumbfounded. He had a long lanyard with a loop for every expected prisoner. He had hoped to be the man who would personally greet each freed man. He would look into his eyes, exchange a word or two to determine his condition, and then place one of the loops on his wrist to ensure that he was now in friendly custody. It just couldn't be happening!

There was a temporary increase in gunfire outside the compound when the Greenleaf elements returned from the Secondary School and moved into their assigned positions, replacing the Redwine troops. Not long after that, little more than twelve minutes after the beginning of the assault, Sydnor ordered the raiders to withdraw to their extraction landing zones. It was all over. Everyone was crushed with disbelief. No one was ready to go home empty handed. Once again George had to remain at the gate and protect the withdrawal of his Blueboy colleagues as they funneled with Banana's Air Force crew toward the exit hole in the southwest wall. Dick Meadows and "Billy K." Moore entered the disabled helicopter to prepare it for irreparable destruction. They placed the specially prepared explosive charge with a ten-minute delay fuse under the floor in the bilge

sump between the fore and aft fuel tanks. Then they padlocked the cover to ensure that no one could get to the charge and disable it.[53] This is how Meadows described their departure from the prison:

> MSGT Moore went into the HH-3 and prepared his destruction device to destroy the helicopter. SFC Dodge maintained radio watch. I recovered the PRC-77 and placed it in the HH-3 as planned and carried the fire fight simulator and placed it north of the latrine #3, then took up a position near the front of the helicopter. While waiting for MSGT Moore to complete his work, I saw a SAM to the south ascending, however, I did not see it hit anything or blow up. After considerable time I gave an "up" (charge in place and ready to fire) to WILDROOT who in return gave a "marry up" (activate charge and report to Apple 2). MSGT Moore pulled the fuse lighter to the charge and I pulled the fuse lighter to the fire fight simulator. The HQ Element moved through the hole and reported to Apple 2.[54]

Redwine

Capt. Daniel D. Turner commanded the Redwine Group in Apple Two. He had twenty-men in six elements that included Ground Force Commander Sydnor and the medical officer, "Doc" Cataldo. Redwine Group's mission was to secure the area that was enclosed between the south wall of the POW compound along the river to the pump house, then eastward along the canal to the small road bridge, and then north along the road to the air raid shelter trench. They were to establish a defensive position at the road-canal junction, set up helicopter departure landing zones, and protect the evacuation of rescued prisoners. Their alternate mission (Plan Green) was to assume the security role of the Greenleaf Group in case this support force failed to reach the POW camp. This amounted to securing the entire area outside the POW compound.

Anticipation of impending attack escalated when Apple Two's ramp came down. Cooler fresh air rushed in, and the raiders could see moonlit rice paddies and trees whiz behind their low-flying aircraft. Captain Turner issued the anticipated preparatory commands and everyone was ready for action. He describes what followed:

> At this time I was beside the PJ at the left minigun. I saw Greenleaf's bird flare and touch down. Immediately Greenleaf started debarking. I looked over and saw Blueboy's bird hovering over buildings. It was as if he was looking for a place to put it down. At that instant, my bird pulled up and made a tight climbing right turn. The result was chaos in the back of the bird. We all lost our footing, weapons and ammo was everywhere, and we were all scrambling to get back up and prepare to debark. I scrambled for the window again, but was pushed aside as the mini gun opened fire. At this point, I thought we had missed our LZ [landing zone], much like Allison had done on the last practice at Eglin, and I thought we were making a quick "go-around" and coming back into the same LZ. Little did I know that Greenleaf had debarked at the wrong place.[55]

Lt. Col. John V. Allison, pilot of Apple Two, followed behind Banana and Apple One. He saw this unexpected event unfold and took immediate and prudent corrective action. He spun his helicopter around and followed Banana to the well-lit POW camp that was just a few seconds' flight time to the north. His announcement over the intercom that he would be implementing Plan Green and disembarking the troops in Apple One's landing zone was lost on most of the raiders that were struggling to regain their footing and retrieve their battle gear. However, the left door gunner, T. Sgt. William E. Lester, knew exactly what he had to do. He let loose on the guard billets with a steady stream of bullets at four thousand rounds per minute. Tracers set fire to the building's thatched roof. Then, as the helicopter descended, his hail of bullets streamed past the rooftop and hit the camp's administration complex, which was beyond it. Maj. John C. Waresh, A-1E copilot of Peach One that was circling overhead at three thousand feet, was fascinated by the intensity and accuracy of this helicopter's firepower. He saw the building's thatched roof light up with fire and some tracers go right through the windows and walls into the administrative buildings beyond it.[56]

Ground Force Commander Sydnor was beside Lester, and even though he did not see Apple One land, he understood the meaning of Allison's intercom shout, "Apple One is not here!" So, as they disembarked after a soft landing, he grabbed Captain Turner by his harness and told him to switch to Plan Green.[57] There was understandable confusion as Turner tried to inform his three Security Element leaders and two pathfinders of the sudden change in Redwine's mission. Disturbed and very confused enemy guards

began to retaliate. Turner's radioman, Sgt. Terry L. Buckler, the youngest raider who had not been to Vietnam before, might have been the first raider to score a victory at Son Tay. He fired his M-16 from the helicopter ramp at a guard on the western side of building 7B. The guard was shooting at the raiders as they dispersed to their assigned areas of responsibility.[58]

The absence of twenty-two Greenleaf members concerned Bud Sydnor, but it did not unnerve him. Plan Green for this scenario had been carefully planned and repeatedly exercised. There was no need for him to shout new commands to redirect the just-begun assault. Each Redwine element had a seasoned noncommissioned officer leader, and each member knew exactly what his role was under the new plan. Sydnor trusted every man to do his assigned task, and he remained confident that the raid could still be executed in thirty minutes as planned. Troops who had served under him when he led them in combat believed that he had ice in his veins. Those closer to him knew that his secret was to have a good plan with several alternate options and to execute it with good people who were properly trained and equipped to handle the mission. This was definitely the moment when such a strategy would be required.

The switch to Plan Green did not alter the tasking of Sydnor as the ground force commander and that of his immediate entourage, which included "Doc" Cataldo, two radio communications operators (Sgt. 1C Marion S. Howell and S. Sgt. Paul F. Poole) and Capt. James W. McClam, marshaling area control officer. Their location was supposed to be just south of building 8E and across the east to the air raid shelter trench on the west. As they moved toward that location, they received a warning from Captain Turner that one enemy was seen moving toward their location. Sydnor saw the man, and having radios in both hands, he directed Poole to shoot him. Poole dispatched the enemy promptly, dropping him into the trench the command party needed to cross. This curving trench was deeper than they anticipated, so Sydnor decided not to go across it. Instead he established his command position right there. It was very near the planned helicopter departure landing zone.[59] This location then became the best-protected area and a place through which the rescued prisoners would be funneled for evacuation by helicopters.

Plan Green changed the scope of the raid significantly. While the Blueboy mission inside the POW compound remained unchanged, the twenty-man Redwine Group could no longer carry out several operations to provide optimum security for the raider force. The burden to secure the camp area for successful extraction of prisoners and raiders

had to be done by only twenty men. Redwine's Security Element #1, led by MSgt. Herman Spencer, retained its original tasking to secure the area south of the compound wall and connect with Blueboy at the exit hole by the Song Con River. Security Element #3, led by Sgt. 1C Donald D. Blackard, had another "must do" task. Their job was to ensure that no ground reinforcements advanced up the road that ran east of the camp. They had to establish a defensive position at the small bridge over the canal southeast of the camp. Security Element #2, led by M. Sgt. Joseph W. Lupyak, had the most difficult task of all. Instead of providing protection for the raiders from the south along the irrigation canal, they now had to go north and clear the guard barracks and other buildings beyond. Captain Turner and his radio operator would forgo their role of protecting Sydnor and his command group and move north to assist Lupyak by clearing the buildings adjacent to the east compound wall. That was a tremendous task for these five men to handle. Greenleaf was scheduled to take care of this area with fourteen men from two Greenleaf elements under Captains Walther and Rouse. There was no way for these five men to clear the area east of the road. Captain Nelson's five-man Security Element should have covered that whole sector. It would now be left undefended against reinforcements that could come across the footbridge from the citadel. A-1E Skyraiders would have to provide as-needed interdiction in this sector. Another void area was the canal to the south. Any ground forces advancing through the rice paddies from the suspected enemy command and control center at the bend of the road would have to be taken care of by the pathfinders and Sydnor's command group. Again, there were airborne A-1Es that could see and take care of any enemy movement in this sector.

Because the assault began to evolve according to the practiced alternate plan, Sydnor could focus his attention on finding out what happened to the Greenleaf Group and its helicopter. Using his radio call sign "Wildroot," he soon contacted Bull Simons. He was comforted to learn that "Axle," Bull Simons's call sign, did not crash and that the Greenleaf Group was involved in a fight of its own. Apple One was going back to exfiltrate them from their predicament. Sydnor made one significant decision about the Song Con River bridge. He directed Peaches One and Two to attack it with Rockeyes and to strafe it whenever they detected any movement north of it.[60] The A-1E pilots did this with enthusiasm.

Once the Apple Two helicopter departed, Captain Turner focused his attention on the dispersal of his group. He moved about in the vicinity

of the landing zone with his radio operator Buckler, making sure that everyone had shifted gears and was responding properly to Plan Green. They saw four enemy soldiers emerge from building 8D and run north between the east compound wall and the camp's suspected kitchen and mess hall. These were the same soldiers who had come under fire from Petrie when they ran past him at the gate. They also noticed one guard evading Spencer's element and moving toward Sydnor's ground force command party. Turner warned them, and the guard was killed when he came upon the alerted group that was establishing a command position just east of a bend in the trench.

Redwine Security Element #1, led by M. Sgt. Herman Spencer, was supposed to secure the area south of the wall by clearing buildings 8D, 8E, and 4A and then link up with the Blueboy Group through a hole in the wall near the southwest corner that was on the Son Cong River side of the camp. Spencer's other team members were Sgts. 1C Joseph M. Murray, Noe Quezada, Jerry W. Hill, and SSgt. Lawrence Young. Spencer was slowed down by barbed wire on the north side of the trench, where he came very close to becoming a fatality. As he emerged from a hedgerow that was on the other side of the wire, he came face to face with a guard who fired one burst of an AK-47 at him from about five to seven feet. Lunging forward, Spencer felt the thumps of three or four rounds on his left chest hit the demolition satchel charge he carried slung over his left shoulder. None of the rounds penetrated the specially designed and tightly packed forty-pound C-4 demolition package that was to be used as a Plan Green backup for blowing up the Song Con River bridge. The enemy guard had nothing to shield him from a return burst of Spencer's CAR-15.[61]

Joe Murray was not as lucky as Spencer. He became the only Green Beret to earn a Purple Heart during the raid. He describes how that happened:

> We had landed just to the east of our original landing zone so we had to adjust our route to our objective, bldg. 8D. We hit the hedgerow and I proceeded to the building, but I had lost Spencer. I didn't know if he had been hit or not. I could hear movement of troops inside the building and knew that I could not allow them to break outside. I grabbed a fragmentation grenade instead of a concussion as planned. I released the spoon from the grenade and at that instant I was being fired upon from the rear. I felt my leg convulse forward and burn as the bullet hit me. I knew they had me so I locked my arm on the

> windowsill and dropped in the grenade. I saw Quezada out of the corner of my eye and yelled, "Hit it!" As he dropped to the dirt I saw the doors from the end of the building sail over his head. Amazed that I was still standing, I turned to meet my attackers. Spencer had hit the hedge with the wire and seeing what was transpiring, dropped the three NVAs at my back. Spencer asked if I was wounded and I said yes, but there was no time to stop. We went in and cleared the building of everyone inside.[62]

Spencer's element had to proceed with caution because its right flank was not yet protected. Building 7B housed the prison guards, and Lupyak's Security Element #2, which followed them through the trench, was not yet finished securing it. Nevertheless, Spencer, Murray, and Quezada moved westward toward the river connecting with Hill and Young, who had just cleared the structures next to building 8D. They did not find any enemy soldiers. Building 8E was a stable occupied by one water buffalo. The other was an outdoor latrine. Quezada remained at the south wall, protecting his element from any guards who might come from the east. The rest rounded the southwest corner of the compound, where they linked up with the Blueboy Group through the breached exit hole in the wall. Young and Hill entered the compound. Young carried in the acetylene torch, and photographer Hill managed to take several snapshots of empty cells. Meanwhile Spencer and Murray scanned the terrain across the river and spotted several individuals who were observing the fireworks at Son Tay. Murray fired two M-79 grenades in their general direction, causing everyone to disappear.[63]

M. Sgt. Joseph W. Lupyak, leader of Security Element #2, became aware of the battle plan change as soon as he exited from Apple Two. He saw that they had landed farther to the east, in Greenleaf's landing zone. Apple One and its troops were not there. He realized that his three-man element, which included Sgts. 1C Tyrone J. Adderly and Billy R. Martin, had to make the most drastic mission adjustment of any other raider team. Their mission had been to destroy the pump house on the right bank of the Song Con River and then secure the area north of the canal that ran from the pump house eastward to a small bridge where Security Element #3 would establish a defensive roadside position. From there they were supposed to protect the raiding force and the rescued POWs from any attackers coming across the fields from military installations south of the camp. Now they had to switch their tactics to assaulting and clearing

several buildings east of the camp. This was a tremendously important task. Lupyak's team, with assistance from Captain Turner and his radioman Terry Buckler, had to eliminate all enemy opposition found in those structures. This was the route to the Song Con River bridge that was to be blown up by Greenleaf's Demolition Element. The original plan called for Captain Walther's Greenleaf Command Element and Captain Rouse's Demolition Element, totaling fourteen men, to do this job.

There was no time to waste. Adderly and Martin started out toward the river/canal pump house. After advancing a few yards, Adderly launched two M-79 grenades into the small structure before he got the word that they had to reverse their route and execute Plan Green. Their new target was building 7B, which housed the camp's guards. It was situated due north across the air raid trench which had strings of concertina wire. The roof was on fire from the mini gun strafing by Apples Two and Three. They saw several enemy soldiers scurrying about. Adderly put his M-79 to work again and launched several grenades through the windows while Lupyak and Martin eliminated two guards who exposed themselves outside the building. Then they advanced past Turner and Buckler, who were clearing two small sheds on their left, and passed by the water well, downing two more panic-stricken guards. Upon reaching the northwest corner of their target, Lupyak tossed in concussion grenades and his men strafed the inside of the open bay guard billets, making sure that all remaining and hiding guards were dead. The inside of the building was in ruins. Helicopter mini guns with Adderly's and Lupyak's grenades did their job. There were only dead bodies left in the smoldering remnants of splintered furniture. Satisfied that the building was secured, they moved north to buildings 11 and 12, which were now the responsibility of Turner and Buckler. They set up a position from which they could deny anyone access to the compound through the east gate. This was a very timely move because four soldiers appeared from the vicinity of the support buildings 8B and C, which were next to the larger administration building. Adderly and Martin were ready for them with their already overheated weapons.[64] This was the same group of guards that came under fire from Blueboy's Petrie at the east gate. All four promptly fell to the ground.

That is about as far as Lupyak's element advanced. Turner and Buckler remained south of building 11, and Lupyak's men guarded the open space to the northeast from their position beside building 12. They heard Apple One approaching and were told to hold their position so that Greenleaf troops could resume their original mission. Turner ordered Lupyak to pull

back to his original element's mission. Then they all withdrew through the incoming Greenleaf elements with only one scary moment. For a wink of an eye incoming Carlson and vigilant Adderly faced each other with trigger fingers on their weapons.[65] After that moment, their passage back to the rice paddies was clear.

Sgt. 1C Donald D. Blackard led the third Redwine security element with Sgts. 1C Freddie D. Doss and Gregory T. McGuire. They had a very important objective and the greatest distance to cover. They moved out so fast that they did not get Captain Turner's word about going into Plan Green. Because their tasking remained the same under both plans, Turner let them go and focused on the rest of his Redwine elements, ensuring that the others got the new ground attack order. Blackard's job was to get down to the small bridge where the canal intersected the road, establish a defensive position there, and deny anyone access to the north. This road with numerous military installations all along its length would provide the only motorized access to the camp. Blackard was also a forward air guide who would coordinate their operation with the Skyraider fighters, who had a bird's eye view of the area. They fired a LAW at the transformer shack by the canal before they reached the bridge. Blackard and Doss then covered McGuire, who continued down the road to plant a defensive claymore mine. He made the deepest penetration to the south of Son Tay. He recalls his experience:

> When we arrived I immediately placed a claymore about 50 meters to our front. I remember how difficult it was setting in the claymore. There was barbed wire and other debris that hampered my emplacement. I set the claymore and returned to the security position with the firing device. When I returned, Blackard said that we were to execute our contingency [Plan Green]. The next thing I turned around and Freddy had fired a LAW [Light Antitank Weapon]. The back blast knocked me down and I could not see or hear. They picked me up and dragged me toward the aircraft.[66]

Things were relatively quiet at the defensive position on the bridge. They were far enough away from the action to the north, and nothing was moving south of them. Sometime after McGuire's return to the bridge they detected activity at the bend of the road. A truck convoy was approaching. They wanted to stop it well before it reached McGuire's claymore. Doss took his time with the light antitank weapon and hit the first ve-

hicle head on without realizing that McGuire had not moved out of the way of his back blast. McGuire must have been more shaken up than he remembers. His buddies checked him over but did not drag him toward the aircraft. Several minutes went by before they were called to return to the landing zone. Blackard's element was the last one to reach Allison's Apple Two helicopter.

The last Redwine element consisted of two pathfinders: Sgts. 1C Charles A. Masten and Ronnie Strahan. Their job was to prepare landing zones for helicopters that would pick up the troops and rescued prisoners. They would have to knock down one concrete electric utility tower and any other telephone poles that could be hazardous to arriving and departing helicopters. Our intelligence showed that the electrical tower was only a twenty- to twenty-two-foot concrete pole that did not appear to support any wires. Nevertheless, it was too close to the planned helicopter landing zone and had to be brought down with explosives. Area telephone poles were of wood and much shorter. They ran along the road on the north side of the camp. Only one telephone pole was near the intended landing zone. This one could be chopped down with an ax brought in by Doc Cataldo.

Under Plan Green the pathfinders had to assume the security mission of Lupyak's element. Adderly got them started by softening up the pump house with a couple of grenades before he got the word to switch to Plan Green. Masten advanced toward the pump house alone while Strahan moved to the right toward the concrete electric utility pole. Masten encountered one confused enemy soldier who ran inside the six-by-eight-foot building. Masten tossed in one grenade and then emptied the rest of the rounds from his M-16 magazine into it. After that he joined Strahan at the concrete pole. He rested his M-16 against the pole and assisted Strahan in placing four one-pound packets of C-4 around its base. Masten's M-16 was in their way. When Strahan grasped it by the barrel to move it, it was still so hot that it burned his gloved hand.[67]

Masten and Strahan were ready to activate the fuse on the prepared charge when they saw Apple One returning from the Secondary School. The helicopter flew right over their heads and made a soft landing about sixty yards away. They activated the fuse as soon as Apple One departed and watched the tower rise up in the air. That was when they found out that the pole supported four live electrical wires. For a few seconds after the blast they saw sparks from loose electrical wires dancing about in the near rice paddies all the way to the canal.[68] These severed and shorted high voltage electrical lines offer an explanation to the ensuing blackout

on the western side of the town of Son Tay. At about 2:30 A.M. both low- and high-flying aircraft noted that the lights went out in the vicinity of the objective area. That time frame fits in with destruction of this tower and the arrival of Greenleaf at Son Tay.

After ensuring that the downed power lines posed no hazard to the raiders, Strahan and Masten got busy setting up beanbag lights to illuminate the departing zone that would now be near Sydnor's command post location.

Greenleaf at Son Tay

Once en route to the original landing zone at Son Tay, Bull Simons and Udo Walther pondered what would happen next. They never practiced a late arrival on target. Once a helicopter dropped out of the original attack plan, the appropriate alternate plan kicked in automatically and there was no scenario in which a once lost helicopter would return and its men placed in action again. But this is what was about to happen. Greenleaf men would disembark and move into their designated target areas that were already occupied by men of the Redwine Group. There was a potential for friendly fire. In training sessions a moving figure in front was considered to be the enemy. Simons had a pretty good feel for what was happening. He had monitored all transmissions between Sydnor and his men at Son Tay. He knew that the ground operation under Plan Green was progressing as rehearsed. Now they had to count on every man to do just the right thing. Sydnor had already directed the A-1Es to bomb the bridge with Rockeyes to deny the enemy access from the north. He now instructed his Redwine men to hold their positions until they were replaced by arriving Greenleaf troops. On top of that Sydnor and Simons grew apprehensive about information they were receiving from Dick Meadows inside the compound. His reports continued to affirm that the place was devoid of POWs.

As soon as Apple One landed, the troops dispersed in accordance with their original plan. Captain Walther's men moved swiftly to check out the smoldering barracks building that had already been cleared by Lupyak's element. Captain Nelson's men moved to their area on the north-to-south road. Bull Simons stopped Captain Rouse's demolition team from taking up their assigned route along the east wall to the bridge.[69] Rockeye cluster bombs dropped on the bridge made it inaccessible to friend and foe alike. It was no longer safe for the Greenleaf demolition team to approach it.

Sgts. 1C Earl R. Bleacher, Jakovenko, and Carlson did not get the word and advanced toward the camp's kitchen and the guards' mess hall.

When Greenleaf's troops crossed the air raid shelter trench, they flushed out one enemy soldier clad only in shorts and a dark T-shirt. He was most likely a survivor from the guard barracks who chose to hide in the trench after Lupyak's element cleared the area. Several raiders drew their weapons on him and hesitated because others were in their line of fire. Bleacher fired at him past Bull Simons, but a much later consensus among the onlookers was that it was Bull Simons whose three sidearm shots brought him down.

Redwine men, who were now in Greenleaf's way, stopped moving and waited for their replacements with great caution. Spencer had moved east along the wall with the forty-pound satchel charge that had saved his life by stopping several bullets. The satchel was no longer needed as an alternate charge to blow up the Song Con River bridge. Sydnor told him that the Peaches had already taken it out. So he tossed the satchel inside of building 8D and watched the return of Greenleaf troops. He looked toward the guard barracks building, waiting for them to come north from the landing zone. Walther and Suarez flushed out one enemy from the east end of the barracks. Spencer spotted him and saw his buddy Lawhon, who had just emerged on the western side of the same building and was not aware of the enemy on his right. Spencer shot the guard, with the bullet passing just past Lawhon's shoulder. Lawhon thought that he had been subjected to friendly fire.[70] A short while later, and just a few yards to the north, Adderly and Carlson faced off and pointed their weapons at each other. They recognized each other instantly and drew sighs of relief.

Captain Nelson's area of responsibility was not assigned to anyone from the Redwine Group under Plan Green. His original task was to send Sgt. 1C Richard W. Valentine and S. Sgt. Thomas E. Powell as roadrunners with an M-60 machine gun to the bridge to secure it before members of Captain Rouse's Demolition Element made their way to it along the POW compound's east wall. There was a camp housing the National Police Headquarters about one block away on the other side of the bridge. Opposition from that sector could hamper the work of the demolition team. Nelson and his other two element members, Sgts. 1C Jack G. "Doc" Joplin and Donald E. Taapken, were to clear the buildings east of the road that they suspected housed the camp commander and other officers. Now that they were in their proper landing zone, they moved to the road to accomplish this task.

As they crossed the road, Taapken fired some grenades against the nearest house while Nelson and "Doc" Joplin moved in to clear the building. Doc came to a window where he heard a dog and men's voices coming from inside. He dropped a concussion grenade through the window and moved with Nelson to the door on the north side. They encountered two enemy officers on the inside. Both appeared stunned by the concussion grenade and by the appearance of the raiders. When Nelson and Joplin came out after securing the building, they were surprised that the roadrunners, Powell and Valentine, who had fired clearing shots toward the bridge before they entered the building, had not advanced up the road. Taapken informed them that they missed the call for pull back while they were inside.[71] Then they retreated to the eastern landing zone, where they awaited orders from Captain McClam, the marshaling officer, to board the second departing helicopter.

Redwine's Return to the Original Plan

As soon as Greenleaf members appeared in their properly designated areas east of the compound, Lupyak and his two element members returned to their original mission. They rushed south to the canal to ensure that the pathfinder team had already cleared the pump house. Then they learned that Blueboy did not find any prisoners and that the ground force commander had called for everyone to roll back. It was a shocking turn of events. Joe Lupyak felt like he had just received a tremendous kick in the gut. They remained in place scanning terrain to the south and then spotted a convoy of trucks at the turn of the road south of Blackard's position. It was the same convoy that Doss had stopped in its tracks with his antitank round. Lupyak's element was not aware of this. He saw blinking lights around the vehicles and fired his light antitank weapon at the convoy. His element remained there until they were called to the nearby marshaling area to board the first outbound helicopter.[72]

Departure from Son Tay

Departure from Son Tay was orderly and unhurried but very exciting. The North Vietnamese began launching their surface-to-air missiles during the marshaling process, and the raiders got to hear their thundering roar

and see the bright streaks of fire rising from the ground all around them. Several sites were close enough that the bright lights and noise made it seem that the SAMs were being launched just from across the river or the road. Because there were no prisoners, Sydnor decided to use only two helicopters to exfiltrate the raiders. Apple One came in first to pick up the troops at 2:37 A.M. Captain McClam controlled the boarding of assembled raiders. By his count, twenty-six raiders from the Blueboy and Redwine Groups plus three Banana crew members took off at 2:40 A.M. Apple Two arrived one minute later to pick up the rest of the men. This boarding of a reported thirty-three men took a while longer. McClam had to use his night vision goggles to identify three late-arriving members of Blackard's element who came across the rice paddies from the canal bridge.[73] Then Sydnor issued his last ground command to the circling A-1Es. It was an order to execute "Free Swing," which meant that the ground forces were out of the target area and that the fighters were on their own to detect and attack enemy targets.[74] Apple Two was off with a reported thirty-three passengers on board at 2:45 A.M.

The Holding Area

One would think that once Marty Donohue got his helicopter safely on the ground, he would thank his lucky stars and shut down the engines to prevent the transmission from coming apart. No one would have blamed him had he abandoned this helicopter and boarded either Apple One or Apple Two, which soon joined him in the holding area. But this is where his long experience with the HH-53 paid off. Just before he took off from Udorn, one of the men who had serviced the helicopters prior to their secretive takeoff recognized him and commented that he was going to fly a practically new helicopter that had barely seventy-five flying hours. Marty had picked up the first eight HH-53s from the Sikorsky factory and deployed with them to Southeast Asia in 1967. During the first hundred hours many of the aircraft experienced main transmission chip warning light events, and in all cases the problem turned out to be only fine pieces of metal or fuzz. Sitting in the rice paddy, he knew in his gut that this was also what his new chopper's problem was.[75] He stuck with his helicopter and saved the Air Force an expensive Super Jolly Green Giant.

The Apple Three crew sat in the rice paddy listening to the radios, trying to picture what was happening at the camp. They were not aware

that Apple One had landed at the Secondary School until they heard that Greenleaf Group was let out in the wrong place and that the ground operation at Son Tay was being conducted under Plan Green. When Apple One brought Greenleaf to the right location, they began to hear incredible reports that there were no prisoners in the compound. They heard the rollback call and orders for Apples One and Two to pick up their passengers. At about that time they witnessed the first SAMs, which continued to light up the sky throughout the ground force extraction. The count of souls on board the helicopters was confusing. There was a recount, but by that time the departing Apples One and Two were getting out of radio contact range. Was Apple Three still needed as a backup to pick up someone? They witnessed two aircraft being hit by SAMs. They learned from their radio call signs that these were Wild Weasels and that they were still flyable. Finally, someone remembered that Apple Three was still sitting there. Peach One called them at 2:48 A.M. and told them to depart. Four minutes later ramp pararescueman Sowell reported seeing the explosion that destroyed Banana inside the courtyard.[76]

Cherry Two's Radio Monitoring Orbit

Our mission's radio silence ended with the "Alpha, Alpha, Alpha" call from Cherry One. Thereafter, we could hear the Apples and Peaches and the raiders on the ground throughout our airdrop sequence. Their transmissions were punctuated with discernible small arms fire. At 2:20:30 A.M. we heard a very disturbing transmission. Redwine radio reported, "We lost Axle." Axle was the code name for Bull Simons. To us this meant that his chopper, Apple One, with twenty-seven men on board, was gone. Soon after that we heard Bud Sydnor's order to execute Plan Green. Were all the other helicopters in trouble? Were they attacked before the flares were dropped? Were the North Vietnamese waiting for us? Things did not look good from our vantage point.

Before we could grasp the full significance of this development, we heard from Apple Two: "You let them out at the wrong place!" That made immediate sense to all of us who participated in the detailed objective area planning. Apple One must have landed at the site we called the "Secondary School." The twenty-seven raiders of Apple One must be okay! They were dropped off near a building complex about four hundred yards south of the camp.

We were not aware of Apple Three's transmission warning light problems because the crew did not broadcast it on the radio. Cherry One also experienced one potentially serious but unrecorded problem. One of their napalm firebombs failed to exit the aircraft and hung up on the ramp. Heads-up play by the crew loosened the wedged bomb cradle and dropped it into the Finger Lake, where the bomb failed to ignite. That avoided a possible confusion for the aircraft that orbited above. The crew did not drop the log flare markers that were positioned just behind the napalm bombs. They brought them back to Takhli.[77]

Once our novice bombardiers, loadmasters T. Sgt. Billy Elliston and S. Sgt. Melvin Gibson, and the second flight engineer, T. Sgt. Dallas Criner, dropped the last log flare from our aircraft, our pilots spotted the initial point (IP). We closed the ramp door, sped up, and climbed to our holding orbit altitude in the foothills just west of the IP.

Our orbit at twenty-five hundred feet was an elongated west-to-east oval track with two-minute straight legs and standard rate left-hand turns to reverse headings. Just as we completed our first loop, David Kender picked up antiaircraft artillery Firecan radar, which appeared to be tracking us from the vicinity of the IP. These signals dissipated as we headed west, but they reemerged when we turned back east toward the IP.

David had at his station sophisticated recording equipment on which he could tape transmissions from six radio frequencies. With the recordings made in the Gulf of Tonkin by the Navy and the Air Force's Combat Apple, College Eye, and RC-135 radio relay aircraft and by the Tactical Air Control Center at Monkey Mountain, this had to be the most extensively monitored joint force operation ever attempted. The radio chatter we heard in our aircraft was overwhelming. We could hear everything that was happening on the ground and over Son Tay. On top of that, our large crew generated a considerable amount of intercom chatter. Our terrain-following obstacle-warning horn was performing as designed. It made a loud beeping sound similar to a construction vehicle moving in reverse gear every time a peak or a ridgeline above our flight level appeared on my radar screen. Since we were orbiting in a valley, high terrain would slide across my radar screen from left to right on each turn.

Sounds of the obstacle-warning horn were interrupted periodically by radio transmissions from the ground forces and the Peaches that were called to attack the bridges in the objective area. The firefight that Greenleaf started at the so-called school must have attracted the attention of soldiers on the city side of the Song Con River, so we were relieved to hear

that Peaches took out the footbridge to the citadel. Bull Simons was okay. His radiomen were communicating with the rest of the ground force.

At 2:27 A.M. we heard a transmission that we did not want to believe. Capt. Dick Meadows reported "negative items" in the compound. No prisoners? Meadows had to repeat his message because there were others who refused to comprehend what he was relaying to everyone from inside the prison walls.

During these shocking moments Greenleaf returned to its originally designated landing spot and Sydnor called for a return to the original assault plan. Shortly thereafter Sydnor called for a rollback and departure from the area. Was this really the end of the POW rescue? Speaking for myself, I was confused. I did not want to believe that there were no POWs in the compound. I could not get my mind off of that development, but I had to stay busy scanning for high terrain off our right wing. The pilots were just as stunned by the news as I was. What if they got distracted and ignored the dark mountain ridges ahead and on our right?

Monkey Mountain Command Post

Manor was concerned about the MIGs. He had to rely on the interpreters of enemy radio transmissions for positive information on their status. Some of them were flying on Air Force's Combat Apple. The Navy had interpreters on ships in the Gulf, and there were some in a secure room right next to the center. They were monitoring North Vietnamese air defense frequencies and focusing specifically on interceptor controllers. College Eye, EC-121T, was supposed to detect the MIGs once they became airborne and provide intercept vectoring for the F-4s. Frog Two's capability appeared to be crippled because of undetermined problems witnessed by the radar operators at the center. Homer Willett, the only man from Manor's staff who had authorized access to the secure room where the interpreters listened, made repeated visits there. They would always assure him that no MIG launch orders had been given. It was encouraging that the Navy's diversion was terminating without a MIG launch. The enemy opted for a SAM defense, just as everyone had hoped. Perhaps the same would hold true for the Air Force aircraft over Son Tay. There was evidence of artillery fire against the F-4 and F-105 aircraft, but the SAM defense radars seemed to take a long time to react. No one realized at that time that SAM launches against the Navy also took a long time to

materialize. Homer reported to Manor about every five minutes on Phuc Yen MIG interceptor status.[78]

After H-hour, radio transmissions from the raiders on the ground burst out on all using frequencies. The first shocking news came when the command post heard that "Axle" Simons was lost and that Sydnor was calling for the alternate plan, Plan Green. Fortunately, before anyone panicked, there was a call about Apple One landing in the wrong place. Planners concluded correctly that one helicopter must have landed at that "Secondary School" to the south. But how could that happen? Did the flares illuminate the wrong camp?

There was too much radio chatter to monitor. Things quieted down some until just about the time the misdirected helicopter arrived in its proper landing zone. That is when Captain Meadows made his bone-chilling call that there were no "items" in the camp. Manor requested confirmation. The repeated report was the same: there were no POWs at Son Tay. Members of Manor's staff were the only ones who understood the coded transmission, but none of them wanted to believe what was happening on the ground. Sydnor soon called for a rollback and departure from the area.

Before anyone could reconcile himself with this incredible news, they heard a call from Son Tay: "SAM, SAM, SAM." The surface-to-air missile battle that had been anticipated was just beginning. Now our jet fighters were in jeopardy, but the low-flying aircraft would be safe from enemy interceptors. This development should have brought some degree of consolation to the members of Manor's staff who had planned for exactly this type of reaction from the enemy's air defenses. Not so; they were stunned by what they were hearing from the forces on the ground.

Cherry Two in the Alternate Radio Monitoring Orbit

David Kender kept picking up artillery Firecan radar every time we got closer to the IP. At 2:29 A.M. he started reporting SAM Fansong radar scanning from the river basin. He assured us that we were not being targeted. Fansong radars were focusing on the high flying F-4s and F-105s. Because we were concerned about the persistent probing by the antiaircraft artillery Firecan, we decided to go to our alternate orbit that was about fifteen miles to the north. At 2:33 A.M. I gave our pilots a heading to it and we were out of there.

We had to climb higher to get to the new orbit, but before we reached it we heard a very chilling scream: "SAM! SAM! SAM!"

"They are not after us! They are not after us!" came the instantaneous response from David Kender, who reassured us with the same excited pitch and volume as the initial alarm broadcaster. It was 2:35 A.M. The Son Tay area SAM battle was on.

In a way, that was good news for us. We did not expect any SAM attacks in our orbit location. We were beyond the range of any known SAM sites. Our low-flying Peaches and Apples were inside the lethal area, but they were too low for effective launches against them. Their biggest hazards were MIG interceptors, but we knew that the North Vietnamese would not launch them while they had their SAMs streaking skyward. That is exactly what our plans anticipated. But all this was bad news for the F-4s and the F-105s. Their airmanship was about to be severely tested. Meanwhile, our low flyers and the ground raiders were ready for departure from the area.

Our second orbit was almost circular. It was located in a bowl-like valley that was surrounded by high peaks, with the lowest terrain being between Son Tay and us. Visibility was excellent and the pilots could see the terrain below and all around us. I had to abandon my efforts to keep the Doppler counters updated because the pilots stopped flying straight course lines and did not use standard rate turns. They flew visually, ignoring the loud obstacle-warning horn that was being triggered almost continuously by my radar. At first, I called each obstacle to their attention, giving them distances and clock positions to the ridgelines, but after repeated assurances that they had the TAs (targets above our flight level) in sight, I stopped bothering the crew with my intercom chatter. Instead I remained alert and kept my face inside the hood of my radar, making sure that the pilots stayed to the left of high terrain that was always close to us off our right wing.

SAM Attacks

Our loadmasters were the first ones to see the SAMs. They described them to us as two telephone poles arching skyward toward the high-flying jets. After an inbound turn crew members in the cockpit could see them also. Kender kept detecting each new launch of SA-2s that began streaking skyward after our jet protectors and decoys.

The "SAM! SAM! SAM!" scream warning was repeated again and

again after each new visible launch. We learned much later that the voice belonged to Maj. Richard Skeels, who flew with 1Lt. James Paine in Peach Three.

Everyone except David Kender, Paul Stierwalt, radio operator Bill Stripling, and I came to the windows to see the streaking SAMs. The four of us remained behind the curtains and paid attention to our instruments. I did not dare abandon my radar vigil and resumed calling out TAs ahead just to make sure that the pilots' eyes were not fixed on the fireworks to the east of us. It appears that of all the raiders, only David, Paul, Bill, and I did not get to see the SAMs. I didn't even get to see the lights of Hanoi. All I saw was what was available to me on my radar with an occasional side glance at Stripling's television-like presentation on the infrared screen. Our curtain remained drawn until we were back in high orbit at Skyline TACAN in Laos.

As this air show went on, we heard Bud Sydnor's call for Apples One and Two to retrieve the Green Berets from Son Tay. But our excitement was not yet over. At 2:40 A.M. we heard an alarming report from one of the Apples: "SAM got one east of here." Our loadmasters confirmed the report. They saw a plane go through a fireball. It was Firebird Three, with Lt. Col. William Starkey and Maj. Everett Fansler. Starkey soon reported that he was okay and that he was returning to Udorn. Lt. Col. Robert Kronebusch called for Firebird Five, the airborne spare, to replace the damaged Wild Weasel. What a relief for us! It appeared that Starkey and Fansler would make it out of North Vietnam all right and that we would not have to get ready for a possible Fulton recovery of two airmen.

Six minutes later, and not far away from us, there was another SAM hit. It was the spare Firebird Five, with Maj. Don Kilgus and Capt. Ted Lowry, that had just replaced damaged Firebird Three. Mike Connaughton had a good view of this event and remembers it vividly to this day: "The SAM hit its external fuel tank and the fire really lit up the night sky, but it only lasted about 4 or 5 seconds and then it was out."[79] Kilgus transmitted for all of us to hear that he was okay. Then he opted to wipe out the SAM site that had nearly knocked him out of the sky. However, during his attack on it he realized that he was leaking fuel. He had to depart immediately to hook up with the nearest KC-135 tanker over Laos. Once again we did not have time to give serious thoughts to a possible Fulton recovery. Both damaged Firebirds were now departing. Firebird Three reported a rough running engine, and Firebird Five was losing precious fuel very rapidly.

F-105 Wild Weasels

While we, as Cherry Two crew members, were only passive observers and tape recorders of SAM attacks, our Wild Weasel protectors in their F-105s were certainly earning their combat pay. Lt. Col. Robert J. Kronebusch submitted a very comprehensive after action report on his flight's activity. It is replete with professional jargon on tactics and electronic terms, but some portions are in everyday language.

Kronebusch took off from Korat RTAFB at 1:45 A.M. Son Tay local time in Firebird One. Majs. Robert J. Reisenwitz and Raymond C. McAdoo in Firebird Two ground-aborted. They switched to a spare aircraft and, with ample time allowed for inbound refueling, made up all their lost time. Kronebusch estimates that their battle with SAM batteries started about twenty-five minutes after they arrived at their orbiting stations over Son Tay. He relates that he was the first one to fire his Shrike missile at a site that locked on to him.

> I was head-on to the site at .86 mach and 11 miles out. I pulled up 20 degrees at 10,000 feet and launched the first Shrike. The results of this firing are uncertain because the signal environment was becoming so dense that it was kind of hard to tell when a site went down. From this time on things got a little disruptive because of the evasive flying we were doing. Firebird 3 received a hit from a SAM at about 0235. I saw him torch immediately after the hit, probably from fuel in the 650-gal. centerline tank we carried that night. Someone transmitted "Drop your centerline" and the flame went out in about 15 seconds. Then Firebird 3 called out "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," heading 035 degrees. Shortly thereafter he indicated he was in control and turning west.
>
> The Vietnamese obviously knew what our headings were and never locked on while we were heading in toward them. We usually didn't receive full strength tracking signals while facing the sites. It was only after turning away at least 45 degrees that they would lock on and fire so that the crew that was fired on would have to start evasive action. Any other crew lined up at that time could fire if signal strength was strong enough.[80]

Reisenwitz and McAdoo in Firebird Two launched their first Shrike at a good signal right off their nose that was coming from the vicinity of Son

Tay and then began aggressive evasive actions. This is how Reisenwitz recalls it:

> It wasn't long before we were being tracked by a single SAM with another one slightly behind it. I turned to put the SAM on my wingtip, rolled out of my turn, and it stayed steady on the canopy without moving forward and back. This was a collision course. SAM was tracking us. I made a hard quick turn and rolled out. The SAM did the same, positioning itself again on a collision course. We were surprised at how quickly the SAM corrected its course. The second SAM started to fall farther behind and was no longer taking lead on us. The big danger is if you take evasive action too early, you wind up with no altitude, low airspeed, and little maneuverability, having expended all three in your maneuver. We concentrated on the first SAM, applied our standard evasive maneuver and the SAM detonated safely below us. The second SAM passed considerably behind us. There were five SAMs fired at the F-105s in this time period and one of these damaged Firebird Three.[81]

Assured that damaged Firebird Three with Lt. Col. William J. Starkey and Maj. Everett D. Fansler were departing safely, Kronebusch called in the spare Firebird Five with Maj. Donald W. Kilgus and Capt. Clarence T. Lowry to join the fray. Unfortunately, this was not to be their night. This is how Lowry remembers it:

> We almost immediately got one of the SAM sites off our nose and attacked it with a Shrike anti-radiation missile just about the same time he fired at us. I think we were going about 325 knots when the Shrike came off the rail and Don rolled the aircraft to get the SAM in a position where he could build some airspeed and evade it. He was probably one of the best pilots I've ever known, and he easily made the SAM miss, and the next one that followed the first. The sky was alive with missiles, but about all we could see when one was airborne was a big fireball oscillating upward as it guided toward its target. The scary part was when the fireball only got bigger. Then we knew that we were the target. Don made three SAMs miss, but in the third actual engagement against the fourth missile, he wasn't so fortunate. We thought we were clear of it, but it blew up pretty close to our aircraft. There is no fireworks display that can match the brightness and

> noise of a 450-pound warhead going off in your ear and throwing your aircraft like a toy. Don never had a problem controlling the airplane, and after he sorted out what had happened and I had indicated my desire that we leave the area, he told me the airplane was still flying and "we still have guys on the ground down there so we're staying." In fact the airplane did fly well even with a damaged stability augmentation system. Shortly after being hit, we engaged another SAM site and fired our second and last Shrike at it. In a very few minutes we realized the SAM had blown some holes in our fuel tanks because we were losing fuel faster than we were burning it.[82]

Meanwhile, Reisenwitz and McAdoo continued evading SAMs and AAA batteries that became active, but ineffective. Their cockpit electronic warning lights were completely saturated. They agreed to turn off the AAA warning scopes to focus better on the deadlier SAM warning lights. Six more SAMs came up into their air space.

> The first two SAMs were not tracking us. The remaining ones did not respond to our flight path changes. We then initiated a rapid descent and an easy turn away from the missiles, increasing our speed to supersonic. As we got increasingly closer to the ground, the second pair of missiles leveled off. The last two continued down with us. When we got to the telephone pole altitude, they leveled off about 500 feet above us. One of them detonated above us and slightly past us. Ray said that he heard the other go by.[83]

Seeing his second aircraft, Firebird Five, engulfed in a SAM fireball was enough for Kronebusch. They had accomplished their mission by focusing the North Vietnamese attention on their high altitude presence. That is all that was needed. Mission did not require destruction of SAM sites, so he ordered his three remaining aircraft to move farther to the west.

> I called Firebird flight to move westward five miles. My reasoning was that SAM sites did not appear to fire at us when we were at 15 miles or more, although 15 miles was in their range. Only when we reduced the distance to less than 15 were we fired on. The sequence of events after this is hard to recall. We fired a total of eight Shrikes out of the ten we carried. All of the pilots feel that they fired within the parameters of the Shrike, usually 8–12 miles in a loft delivery

from 10–12,000 feet. The distance was relatively accurate since we knew locations of the sites before takeoff and found it easy to keep oriented while in the area with reference to the river, the objective and the lights of Hanoi. The SAM missiles were visible throughout their entire envelope and could positively be identified at launch. I estimate that a minimum of 16 missiles were launched at the Weasel force.

As for AAA, there was some but it never became a factor except when we were at low altitude evading a SAM. There was 37- and 57- and some 23-mm in our area but it wasn't very effective at night. We saw some awesome 85- and, I think, 100-mm stuff going straight up in the Haiphong area in the distance. Not a factor for us.

I departed at 0255 after 47 minutes on station. Shortly after departing I heard a call from Firebird 5 to move the Lemon tanker north as he was losing fuel rapidly. After one transmission the tanker was started northward and Firebird 5 called 1000 lbs. and dropping rapidly. He asked Brigham for a steer to a safe area and this was misunderstood, so Falcon 5 immediately said "head for 108"; I repeated "Firebird 5 head directly to Skyline108 and try to bailout over the site." Firebird 5 acknowledged and then I concentrated on my own fuel situation.[84]

As exciting and life threatening the overhead of Son Tay was that night, some crews took it almost routinely. Firebird Four's crew members, Maj. Murray B. Denton and Capt. Russel T. Ober tape-recorded their cockpit conversations. Amid the persistent beeping of enemy radar signals, this is how they countered one SAM launched against them:

Ober: "Missile locked on."
Denton: "Diving."
Ober: "Still locked on."
Denton: "Here come the tree tops."
Ober: "It's close."
Denton: "Pulling up. Hang on."
Ober: "It's too damn close."

There was a long pause while they recovered from the G forces upon their bodies before Denton calmly concluded, "Not a great way to make a livin.'"[85]

They earned what was at that time the going rate, $65.00 combat pay for the month.

F-4 Falcons

The F-4 Falcons represented one half of the high altitude targets for the North Vietnamese SAMs and AAAs. They were there to take care of any MIGs that would come up to challenge the raider fleet. They were well equipped for that role with their air-to-air radar guided and infrared homing missiles, but they did not have any air-to-ground ordnance to challenge the SAM and AAA radar sites. They had sufficient electronic equipment to detect these ground-based threats, and their defense against them was contact avoidance and pilot skills.

The first wave of them, Falcons One through Five, refueled inbound on track Orange and arrived at their two orbiting stations within a minute after the F-105s. Each pair began its five-minute racetrack pattern, one at 17,000 and the other at 19,000 feet, both above the figure eight pattern of the four F-105s that flew at thousand-foot separation from 13,000 to 15,000 ft. Crews were excited and hoped that the enemy would make the anticipated choice to engage them with SAMs instead of MIGs. Each Falcon carried only air-to-air ordnance, which consisted of four radar guided and two infra-red homing missiles. That was appropriate for challenging the MIG threat. Their defense against the SAMs was an electronic countermeasures pod and aggressive pilot evasion of oncoming missiles. It would be their first nighttime exposure to SAMs and they hoped that those would be much more visible at night than in the daylight. On their first contact with the EC-121 Frog Two, they learned that their new equipment was not working and that they would not be able to receive directional commands to assist them in locking on to airborne MIGs. That was bad news, but still they hoped that the enemy would keep their aircraft on the ground and counter only with SAMs.

As expected, the North Vietnamese defenses were in disarray. Their surprise was complete. It began with the navy over Haiphong and now intensified with air force intruders who were setting up orbits just west of Hanoi. Their early warning radars detected even more aircraft over Laos; tankers that were refueling still more F-4s. Nevertheless, they were experienced air defense crews that had many daytime successes against U.S. aircraft, and they knew from the orbits they saw on the radars that

they faced SAM site–killing F-105 Wild Weasels and dreaded F-4 fighters. It didn't matter if they were just awakened from a comfortable sleep or shaken up from another boring night's vigil, they were at their stations, cranking up their targeting radars and getting ready to fire at the eight high-flying aircraft above.

Seeing live SAMs rising from the ground was just as the intelligence officers described. From about three miles up, a freshly launched missile rising from the ground looked like it was coming right at you. It looked like a small flaming donut with a dark dot in the middle—that was the warhead. As the missile rose up and up and retained its ever increasing donut shape, it was heading right at you. If the center dot or hole disappeared and the fireball began stretching out, it was headed to the side as a flaming arrow toward somebody else. There were plenty sights like that and every one, so much better visible at night, gave each crew a scare.

Maj. Jimmy C. "Coy" Pettyjohn and his backseater 1st Lt. Thomas A. Wagner started out as Falcon Fifteen, airborne spare for the second F-4 wave of five aircraft, but had to change their tasking because Falcon Twelve with Capts. Douglas P. Brown and Charles E. Smith ground aborted and switched to another aircraft. That delayed their take off and caused Falcon Fifteen to assume their assigned orbit northeast of Son Tay over the Thud Ridge.

By the time the second wave got to their stations, SAM battle was already hot. Fansong radars tracked Falcon Fifteen just as it needed to make the left hand turn to establish its orbit.

> Almost immediately after making the left turn I began to get indications that Early Warning Radar was tracking us. My radar scope indicated that it was at about the 2 o'clock position at about 30 to 35 miles. Soon afterwards my radar warning instruments indicated that the SAM radar (Fan Song) acquisition was tracking us. Very quickly the SAM "lock-on" light came on. The position from our aircraft was still at about our 3 o'clock position. At that time I lit my afterburners and started picking up airspeed quickly (we were in a very clean configuration so the airplane responded well). As I was doing this I got a SAM launch light and I heard radio calls calling out SAMs. I pushed the nose over and kept the afterburners lit and was picking up airspeed very quickly. At the same time all of this was happening I saw the plume of fire from the launched SAM. I am not sure what my airspeed was at this time because I had been watching

the SAM. But being in a dive with the afterburners lit I know that I was over Mach 1 (maybe 1.1 or1.2).

As the SAM appeared to turn toward us I started a very hard right climbing turn back in that direction. I am not sure how many Gs I was pulling because I was focused on the outside (but when we landed back at Udorn after the mission I saw that the G meter was pegged at 8.5. Whether it reached that point in that turn or the next turn I don't know). I watched the SAM as it passed on by us but it was well outside our turn.[86]

That wasn't all. Falcon Fifteen remained a prime SAM target for what must have seemed like an eternity. As soon as Pettyjohn recovered from the first defensive maneuver, his F-4 was fired on again. He had to relight the afterburner and repeat the maneuver that proved successful once more. After that he did not experience any more SAM "lock-ons," but witnessed the North Vietnamese salvo unguided missiles in groups of threes that went ballistic and exploded harmlessly at burn-out. SAM batteries were known to do this once the Wild Weasels started homing Shrike missiles on their sites. At last, Pettyjohn and Wagner could relax, but because they had used up so much fuel with the afterburner, they had to leave early to hook up with a tanker over Laos.

MIGs?

Meanwhile, David Kender had more excitement for us. He picked up conical scan radar signals from a MIG. These signals were weak and not persistent. They would disappear when we changed headings in our well-established orbit over the bowl-like valley. A long time after the mission we concluded that the signals must have been coming from the two MIGs that were standing by for takeoff on the ramp at Phuc Yen Air Base. We had no time to draw such conclusions while in that orbit. Soon after David's reports of recurring conical scan signals, someone from the departing force issued a MIG warning. That panicked many of us, but David called just what he could observe and assured us that a MIG was not scanning our aircraft.

The MIG call we heard was not the standard rendition of "BULLS EYE" and "BANDITS" with distance and bearing from Hanoi that would have come from College Eye or Combat Apple. Someone had had a visual sight-

ing of what he believed to be a MIG 21 and sounded the alarm. This warning caused the departing helicopters to drop down to treetop level on their way into the mountains. Voice monitors aboard the two Combat Apples heard the MIG warnings originating from the Son Tay area. This is how Colonel Frisbie remembered the event: "One of our A-1E Sandys unloaded his rockets on a hillside and immediately someone, either an HH-53 or the C-130, hollered, 'MIGs!' Then we panicked. The NCO in charge of the airmen and listeners to enemy radios told me 'No MIGs had taken off. There are no MIGs in the area.' On second thought, I should have relayed that info to our guys. I just wasn't that confident in their ability."[87]

Colonel Frisbie was not aware that either that noncommissioned officer or someone else on the alternate Combat Apple issued an advisory to all aircraft that there were no MIGs. Unfortunately, our Apples and Peaches lacked confidence in this "No MIGs" broadcast. They did not know its origin and did not have David Kender on their crew to reassure them. Too late! Their initial scare was real. All departing Peaches and Apples opted for a treetop level escape from the Black River Valley.

Two crew members of Apple Four recall the MIG scare of that night. The first recollection comes from S. Sgt. Wayne L. Fisk, who was positive that one MIG flew above them:

> The MIG was in our midst; in fact, my tail gunner—No. 3 gun position—yelled, "I've got a MIG at 6 o'clock high. He's going up to 9 o'clock. Do you have him, One?" meaning me. I look out towards 8 o'clock high, and here he comes. He looks like he is getting ready to set up for a firing pass on us. He comes around towards 9 o'clock and turns right into us; yet, I can't get the gun up that high. He is too far away, anyhow. Minigun tracer burnout is 750 yards. There is no way I can throw the bullets that far, and the gun is going to be stopped anyway by azimuth limiting pins which prevent us from shooting off our rotors. He is above the top of our rotors, and then he comes barreling in at us. Now why didn't he fire?[88]

Copilot of Apple Four, Maj. Roy R. Dreibelbis, remembers it this way:

> As we entered the mountains to the west of Son Tay I noticed that the mountain valleys had filled with fog or an undercast. It was obvious because the half moon made the fog stick out and shine below us. The mountaintops and ridges were sticking out above the

> fog layers in the valleys. As we were passing over one of the valleys one of the crewmen in the back of the helicopter shouted out on the intercom, "MIG! MIG! Break! Break!" I was at the controls flying from the right seat of the HH-53. For some reason I instinctively realized that we were flying over the bright moon lit background of the fog below us and that we could be easily seen by a fighter pilot behind and above our position. For obvious reasons I did not hesitate. I immediately rolled into a steep descending bank to the left to place us over one of the mountain ridges where we would blend in with the dark mountain background. I continued a rapid descent onto the mountain ridge and slowed the helicopter to nearly a hover. I think we stayed there for a minute or two, got our wits about us and then proceeded on our way from mountain to mountain instead of flying over the open, moonlit, fog-filled valleys.[89]

After the raiders returned home, the HH-53 crews reconstructed this event as follows:

> As Apple 1, piloted by Britton, and Apple 2, co-piloted by Strayer, crossed the Black River, Apple 3, following behind, mistook some nearby A-1E or F-105 aircraft for a MIG and issued a MIG warning. Hearing the MIG call, an A-1E pilot decided to get rid of his rockets to lighten his weight and increase his maneuverability; he also decided to fire them rather than drop them with their pod containers, so that the enemy could not use them if they were found. He therefore sent them into a ridge of hills just west of the Black River, where the helicopter crews saw the explosions and interpreted them, in view of the MIG call, as an attack. They responded by diving to minimum altitude and scuttling along just above the treetops.[90]

Moments before the panicking "MIG call," Monkey Mountain radars detected an unidentified high altitude aircraft in the Son Tay area that did not transmit the required IFF code. Experienced radar operators and Homer Willett concluded correctly that it was one of our own. It was detected departing from the Red River Valley and heading toward a refueling track over Laos. It must have been either Falcon Fifteen with Maj. Pettyjohn and 1st Lieutenant Wagner, who were running short on fuel, or Falcon Five with Captain Wright and Major Malaney, who rushed to intercept the damaged Firebird Five.

The MIG warning call from the departing helicopters also confused Majs. Jerry Rhein and John Waresh in Peach One. Both believed that they were the last to exit from the area when they learned that Apple Three was still in its holding spot north of Son Tay, waiting for instructions from the ground troops to leave. They urged the helicopter crew to depart immediately and then turned back toward Son Tay.

> Jerry and I looked at each other and said "We don't have a choice." With possible MIGs around, a lonely Jolly all by himself makes for a pretty good target. We turned around, climbed to a nice MIG target altitude, three or four thousand, and went Christmas tree. Every light we had was turned on and we slowly drove back to Hanoi. With MIG calls coming every few minutes I was sweating profusely. Don't know if it was hot, I was scared, or just pooped out, but I was soaked. It seemed an eternity, but as the camp and the West side of Hanoi was slipping under the nose we heard the IP call. Lights out and Split-S. We beat feet west for the IP on the deck. Getting away from the river valley and into the dark countryside we climbed to a safe altitude to clear the mountains en-route to Udorn.[91]

It was a very commendable, gutsy act to protect a slower, more vulnerable airborne target. Rhein and Waresh ignored the "No MIGs" call from the Combat Apple and believed that there was a real threat to the stranded helicopter in their air space.

There was one more suspected MIG alert that originated from Cherry One, which was in its high altitude orbit on the Laotian border, from where it was providing radio direction finder steers to the returning Apples and Peaches. Its EWO, Maj. Thomas L. Mosley, detected what he believed to be airborne MIG 21 conical scan radar signal coming out of the Red River Valley. Because all of our low-flying aircraft, including the A-1E Skyraiders who jammed the MIG controller radio frequencies, were already in the mountains west of the valley, it was logical to assume that the North Vietnamese were able to launch their interceptors toward the west to pursue the slow-flying aircraft escaping toward Laos.

Our exit from North Vietnam generated unexpected radio transmissions that puzzled all other aircraft which were conducting their routine nighttime missions over Laos. Because we flew into Son Tay in radio silence at low altitude, they were not aware of our presence until they heard numerous radio calls from aircraft with fruity call signs that were

returning to Thailand. They also heard the search and rescue radio chatter kick in, because there were two F-105s that reported damage from SAMs. Mixed between these transmissions came the report of Cherry One's suspected MIG radar detection. Since we in Cherry Two tape recorded only the raiding aircraft frequencies, we don't have a record of GCI (Ground Control Intercept) communications that ensued. However, The GCI radar in Thailand that was monitoring the airspace over Laos and was assisting Pettyjohn's Falcon Fifteen with air refueling detected an unidentified aircraft ("bogey") coming south toward the exiting "Fruit Salad" aircraft. Since the GCI site had contact with Pettytjohn, they instructed him to intercept this unidentified aircraft. This is how Pettyjohn remembers it:

> I was advised by GCI that they had a bogey coming from the north and they turned us around and gave us a heading for an intercept. I turned back north and armed my air-to-air missiles and we tried to get a radar lock on to any possible targets. Soon afterwards GCI advised that the incoming target was actually one of our F-4s so I was turned back around and was cleared to return to base.[92]

Fortunately, no one issued a MIG alert to the returning Apples and Peaches. Consequently a very likely confusion was avoided. On station MIGCAP time for the F-4s ran out at 3:10 A.M. and their crews were glad to be free to exit the target area. Some headed for the tankers over Laos and others straight home to Udorn. Obviously, Cherry One and the GCI site detected the same exiting aircraft. EWO aboard Cherry One listened to the clicking, chirping sound of a conical scan radar, very similar to both F-4s and MIG 21s when it is heard on the radio headsets.

The USS *Oriskany*

From time to time Bardshar would check on the location of the Air Force's IFF squawking aircraft. He could see the F-4 MIGCAP just past Hanoi, south of the mountain range that became known to U.S. pilots as Thud Ridge. Then farther south and more toward Mount Ba Vi he identified orbiting F-105 Wild Weasels. He was aware of their encounters with SAMs and that two of the F-105s sustained battle damage. But he was satisfied that the MIGs were not going to take off and cause problems for the vulnerable raiding aircraft. He could see only one C-121 College Eye in the

southern part of his diversionary airspace. PIRAZ tracked and maintained contact with both Strategic Air Command RC-135M Combat Apples and one "Luzon" radio relay RC-135. Also present within his domain were two KC-135s from U-Tapao that were there to refuel all comers, including the Navy tankers. All appeared to go very well in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The worst news of the night came from the Green Berets inside the Son Tay compound. There were no prisoners there. P. D. Hoskins was with Bardshar when he received the coded message that there were "zero items" at Son Tay. They were both devastated.

Departure—Exit Monitoring

Cherry Two monitored departing Apples and Peaches as they crossed the Black River and reported heading west into the mountains. Our crew witnessed several explosions in the hills just to the south of our orbit. We concluded that they were caused by the left-over ordnance A-1Es were dumping into the rocky cliffs in order to lighten their loads for the trip home. As much as the pilots wanted to use up their ordnance on opportune North Vietnamese targets, they obeyed our engagement rules for limiting unnecessary damage to the enemy. They engaged only those targets the Army Special Forces forward air guides identified for them. They dropped white phosphorus bombs on the footbridge from the citadel and Rockeye cluster bombs on the road bridge. They also strafed the road bridge periodically to keep everyone away from it and interdicted some vehicles that approached Son Tay from the west.

We learned many years later that the telephone line communications from Son Tay area military complexes, specifically from the Air Defense Officers Academy and the Hoa Lac Airfield, going to the enemy's Air Defense Command were interrupted.[93] Because the ground troops did not cut down any telephone poles that lined the road to the Song Con River bridge, the loss of telephone communications had to be attributed to the A-1E Skyraiders. Either their Rockeye cluster bombs or the 20-mm strafing rounds cut or damaged the communication cable that was strung along the west side of the bridge.

Spare Peach Five with Squires and Sutton was the last to depart from the valley. They were the only ones who did not jettison their unused ordnance and returned with it to Udorn. Once we were assured that all aircraft were in the hills, I gave our pilots an escape heading out of North Vietnam

and we departed at our normal 230-knot terrain-following ground speed. Throughout the departure we monitored confused transmissions from our Apples as they tried to reconcile their passenger counts. The original count of twenty-six raider passengers on Apple One and thirty-three on Apple Two proved to be incorrect. Someone discovered that there were only twenty-five men on board Apple One. Was someone left behind on the ground at Son Tay? Eventually a recount aboard Apple Two revealed that they had thirty-four instead of the original count of thirty-three passengers. That put everyone at ease, but airmen on other aircraft who listened in on the radios were still hoping that the count pertained to the numbers of rescued POWs. But that was not the case. No one was left behind and we did not use any body bags. We could not determine how many Green Berets were injured. That figure did not seem to be in any of the counts being reported over the radio. We did not remember the code word for injured. Stierwalt had all the code words at his station, but he was too saturated with all the chatter to focus on that single detail.

Every raider experienced shocking disappointment over our failure to bring the POWs home. This disappointment would stay with us forever. Many of us could express it very vividly even many years later. Col. Jay Strayer, who as a major had copiloted Apple Two, learned just before the raid that his good friend Capt. Tom Curtis, who was shot down and captured in 1965, was a known POW at Son Tay. He expressed his post-raid reaction in an article he wrote in 1995:

> Disappointed? I remember well the significant mental fatigue that set in as we were on our way out and the final word was confirmed there were "negative items." Jack had turned the controls over to me after we had lifted out of Son Tay with the last man aboard on our way to rendezvous with our tanker. I simply did not have the mental capacity nor physical energy to go through with refueling so I asked Jack to please do so. The sobering realization that I failed to rescue my good friend Tom Curtis was more than I could emotionally handle at the time. I am not inferring that I had lost my usefulness to the crew or the rest of the mission, but I was[,] suddenly and dreadfully, wrung out—I had "had it."[94]

The Special Forces troops might have been the most dejected of all. The men of Blueboy Group had seen the empty prison cells with their own eyes. But there were men from Redwine and Greenleaf who did not find

out that the camp was empty until they reached the marshaling area. A few others, who boarded the second departing helicopter, believed that rescued POWs had departed on the first one and were stunned upon learning the truth from their buddies. There was plenty of excitement during their exit from the valley. They saw numerous SAM launches and felt the evasive maneuvers of their pilots who thought that MIGs were in pursuit. During the recount of persons on board, many feared that someone had been left behind. After that, everyone sat in dejected silence. Some pretended to be asleep. Others prayed. A number of them admitted to me that they cried.

Loss of Firebird Five

Throughout the counting, we were also listening to the damaged Firebirds. Firebird Three was already in contact with the Udorn tower, and Firebird Five was about to run dry as Kilgus headed toward the nearest tanker. Both Firebird crew members had their refueling tanker in plain view just ahead and above them when their bird flamed out. There was only one thing for them to do after that: maintain the optimum glide path toward Skyline TACAN 108 and eject upon reaching a safe and comfortable altitude. Before Kilgus commanded his backseater Lowry to eject, he sent out his last radio transmission: "If I don't make it, tell the guys at the bar I didn't screw up. I was hit!"[95]

Falcon Five, with Capt. Russ Wright and Maj. Jim Malaney, did their best to alert a tanker on Track Orange and had it fly to rendezvous with Firebird Five. They closed in on the damaged bird to see it lose the last bit of fuel. They also witnessed Lowry and Kilgus punch out as their aircraft continued to fall out of the sky far below the anguished crew of the KC-135 tanker. Russ reported their bail-out location in the western part of the Plain of Jars at 090 degrees for eight miles from the Skyline TACAN 108.

At Monkey Mountain Manor agonized over the two SAM hits that damaged the F-105s but was relieved that both exited from North Vietnam safely with adequate escort. All Fruit Salad aircraft, minus the sacrificed Banana, were safely in the mountains, heading back to Thailand. Even the mixed-up personnel count on the departing Apples that troubled the planners in the center got resolved after a few recounts. Everyone was dejected and full of questions about what had just happened during the

half-hour raid that had taken so long and so much effort to prepare. It was time for them to rush back to Udorn where the returning raiders could provide some answers.

Rescue of Downed Crewmen

After our low-level exit from the river basin we climbed up to eighty-five hundred feet and continued to the next planned orbit, northwest of the Skyline TACAN. From there we verified that all our formation aircraft were en route and that they no longer needed navigational assistance for their return to Udorn. Just to the east and below us we had two downed flyers who needed to be rescued. "Friday" Blosch called for the two-man Fulton recovery kit drop checklist. Elliston, Gibson, and Criner moved it to a drop position on the ramp and verified that the winch and other personnel retrieval equipment were ready. Both downed crew members were safely on the ground and empty Apples Four and Five headed into their area for a possible quick pick-up. We thought that we would witness an aviation first—the first use of night vision devices for a nighttime helicopter rescue of downed airmen. This might have come to pass were it not for the low fuel status of the two spare helicopters and the absence of A-1Es to provide air cover against possible hostile forces in the area.

Soon it became very clear to us that the Fulton Recovery System would not be used. Apples Four and Five located Kilgus and Lowry about one mile from each other and then left the area to hook up with the orbiting Lime Two tanker. This gave them the needed fuel endurance for a first-light pick-up. Also, by that time, standby A-1E rescue Sandys from Nakhon Phanom would be on the scene. Besides, our two-man kit could help only one of them. If the terrain permitted them to get together, it would be daylight by the time they could find each other. The choppers could pick them up from wherever they landed.

Kilgus and Lowry were safely on the ground and began to experience post-bailout anxiety. The presence of our aircraft overhead was reassuring, but they were puzzled by the response from the Apples that had located their positions but then flew away. This is how Lowry remembers his predicament:

> The helicopter came in and told me to light a flare so he could get to me. I did what he asked, and he turned his spotlight on me. For

> some reason that I still don't know, he just left. At that moment I was scared more than I can say. I remember saying "where are you going?" but nobody answered. I don't know whether they could talk to me because I was babbling or my radio quit. Anyway, a couple of minutes later I got my second survival radio out and heard the Sandy leader tell me they knew where I was and would be back at first light. I said "thank you" and almost immediately felt completely at ease and all my fears went away.[96]

Don Kilgus was about one mile to the west of Lowry, where he was to spend the rest of the night suspended in a large tree. Surely he was reflecting on his current plight, his family, and the challenging flying career he had already recorded. In his prior tours in Southeast Asia he had flown the O-1 aircraft as a slow Forward Air Controller (FAC), as well as the two-seated F-100F as a Misty fast FAC over the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Panhandle of North Vietnam. On April 4, 1965, while flying in an F-100, he staked his claim as the first American pilot to shoot down a North Vietnamese MIG-17. Even though all his pilot colleagues celebrated his unique achievement, the then-existing rules of engagement registered his aerial victory as inconclusive. Now, after having been shot at many times by every caliber in the North Vietnamese anti-aircraft-artillery, the chief prey of the Wild Weasels had finally struck back and Kilgus had the misfortune to lose his aircraft to a deadly SA-2 surface to air missile.

He established radio contact with arriving Apples Four and Five and was comforted in learning that his backseater Ted Lowry was also safely on the ground. He was confident that he would live to join the guys at the bar and then fly again. This he did! He was a born fighter pilot who loved and thrived in the aerial combat environment. By the time the Vietnam War ended, he completed eight separate tours to Southeast Asia. These lasted anywhere from six weeks to one year. He logged 624 missions over Southeast Asia, 214 of them over North Vietnam. Colonel Kilgus retired in 1985 and was tragically killed at the age of 51 in an automobile accident south of Washington D.C.[97]

We were surprised to hear other aircraft over Laos rushing to the area. The AC-123 "Candlestick" that had been dropping flares over the Ho Chi Minh Trail farther to the east flew in and so did a C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center "Alley Cat." We soon heard that the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service net at Udorn was activated and that we had four A-1E Sandys from Nakhon Phanom and two Super Jolly Greens from

Udorn coming in. Our own Lime One that had returned to Udorn to pick up fuel was returning, no longer as Lime One but as King Twenty-one, an ARRS asset to direct the rescue of Kilgus and Lowry. With this switch, Major Kornitzer, instructor pilot from Eglin, relinquished his Fruit Salad aircraft commander's role to Capt. Richard E. Frank, the original aircraft commander of this HC-130P tanker. That was a good heads-up call by the Rescue Control Center at Udorn. There was no need to launch a standby "King" when a fully qualified "Lime" aircraft was about to take off to fly into the same area over Laos. The rescue situation then normalized. It would be a standard first-light pick-up. Sunrise would occur at 5:53 A.M. Lt. Col. Royal Brown and his crew in Apple Four picked up Lowry, and Maj. Kenneth Murphy in Apple Five picked up Kilgus. Now everyone who had participated in the raid on Son Tay was headed back to Udorn.

Return to Udorn

When our Cherry Two landed at Udorn, we saw rows and rows of fully armed F-4s getting ready to take off. I had to turn off my radar to prevent damage by the electromagnetic energy all these aircraft beamed at us. What was going on? This was definitely a major air attack in the making. Were we part of it? What kind of a hornet's nest did we stir up with our intrusion into the forbidden zone up north? We did not find that answer until we came back home to Eglin. That morning's attack had nothing to do with us. It even had its own name: Operation Freedom Bait. It was a planned retaliation against the North Vietnamese for shooting down an RF-4 reconnaissance aircraft near the demilitarized zone one week before our raid.[98]

Gloom and doom followed once we parked our aircraft. Two medical air evacuation aircraft from the Philippines were there to fly our POWs home. A very tired and sleepy Larry Ropka met us when we opened our crew door. Security police guards were there to secure our aircraft. They had no idea where we had just come from. No one felt like explaining our visibly deflated mood to them. A crew van took us to a building that was all decked out with flags and "Welcome Home" banners arranged by those of our group who did not get to fly in the raid. There were soft drinks, coffee, and donuts on tables just outside the doors. Only a few of us went inside. Most of us joined the Peach pilots and just sat down on

the curb. We were all angry and silent. These were the men we escorted into the most heavily defended North Vietnamese territory and left them there for thirty minutes while we retreated into the safety of the mountains, well out of range of the small arms, AAA, and SAM fire that they had to endure. None of their aircraft got damaged by hostile fire and all returned safely. They should have been delighted to be back on home ground. Not so. Their spirits were shattered. They were angry, and like the rest of us they did not want to talk about it. It was time for private angry thoughts.

Our flying fatigues were soaked with sweat, and their moisture made us feel cool in the morning air. I noticed that I was the only one who had brought a folder with all my charts, logs, and in-flight notes. I thought that I would need them for a debriefing. All my charts were stamped TOP SECRET. So now I had the burden of holding on to them. I ended up putting the folder on the curb and sitting on them.

It must have been a puzzling sight for onlookers. We looked like an athletic team that had lost an important game due to no fault of any one player. People would walk by at their normal pace and slow down upon seeing us, trying to get a better glance at this unusual sight. After they passed by, they would stop and look back at us again. Small groups would form at some distance, and it was obvious that they were asking each other what was going on. They had just passed through our midst, and since we were mostly officers, they popped us proper salutes that were either not answered or slovenly waved off. They did not expect a group of officers to be so gloomy, sitting cross-legged on a dirty asphalt pavement. The "Welcome Home" signs and banners hanging from the building confused them even more. Throughout this time the F-4s we saw upon our arrival were taking off. Their noise was deafening.

Someone came outside with a box of small bottles of cognac that were at times available to crews after a mission. I reached for one, but then I let go of it. I was not in the mood for a drink. Besides, I would be flying back to Takhli. Our duty day was not yet over. I didn't even pay attention to see if my other crew members opted to drown their sorrowful mood in a drink. I remember that I was very angry. It was anger at nothing tangible. Why all that wasted effort? Why did the camp have to be empty?

First Lt. Jim Brinson came outside, and when our looks met he walked over to me and asked me to come in for a debriefing. I gathered up my now well-creased and somewhat dew- and sweat-dampened mission papers from the curb and followed him in. I don't remember much about his

intelligence debriefing. I had all the times for flight events written down. I was prepared to tell him where we were and at what time, but he was more interested in sightings of enemy defense positions and ground fire we received. That was something for those crew members who did not spend the whole mission behind the curtain. I could not see a thing from where I sat. But I had the time figures for the first SAM firings and for several false MIG reports.

I didn't want to rejoin the gloomy group outside the building when Jim finished with me. Now that I could look at them from some distance, I could see how pitiful they looked. Besides, it was somewhat cooler inside. Bull Simons walked by me going from one room to another. He also looked angry, and he didn't have a cigar in his mouth. His face was still smeared with traces of camouflage paint. I stepped toward him in a gesture of recognition, but he passed by, ignoring me.

Soon after that Royal Brown came in from the outside. He looked awful. I would say he looked twenty years older, and he was drenched in sweat. Several straps were dangling from his survival vest. I stepped forward to congratulate him on making a life saving pick-up. He ignored my gesture and walked straight into the room from which Bull Simons had exited moments earlier. I checked the door and noted that it was a men's room. That is when I realized that I also needed to pass through that door.

Various crew members were coming in for debriefing by Jim Brinson, Jack Knops, and others. I went outside and grabbed a glazed donut. I poured myself a cup of coffee that was still hot even though someone had disconnected the power cord. Red Cross workers who were supposed to serve the refreshments were nowhere to be seen. I felt better, but I was still angry. Now I had sugar and coffee stains on my classified papers, which I should have left at my station inside the aircraft.

Before long, Manor and Simons came out and had us crowd around them in the entrance room and the hallways of the building. All I remember is that he thanked us for a well-executed mission and that his remarks included the good news that only two raiders had sustained minor injuries and that the two Wild Weasel guys from Korat were also in good health. He informed us that we would be heading back home after a proper crew rest at Takhli.

Return to Takhli

I don't remember anything about the short flight to Takhli other than that I removed my flag from around my waist. I brought it with me to the secure planning room where we had to return our classified documents and retrieve our personal effects—valets, ID cards, watches, jewelry, and other items that we were not allowed to carry on combat missions. I had to explain my flag to most people who were present, and then I did something that became a tradition that continues to this day. I asked each raider to sign the white canvas border of the flag. Everyone thought it was a neat idea for a souvenir. I resolved then that I would reserve each white star for a signature of any Son Tay POW I would encounter later on in my life. In 1984 Dick Dutton became the first man to fill a white star with his signature during a POW reunion in Austin, Texas.

Once in my quarters, I took a good long shower. Then I darkened the room and stretched out in my bed. Sleep would not come. What we had just gone through was incredible. I was still too angry to sleep. I was so angry that I felt pangs of a headache. Crying should have relieved this, but even though I am prone to shed tears in a good emotion-relieving cry, the anger prevailed.

I dressed again in the only clean fatigues I had left and went to the souvenir shops I had visited the day before. I noted that some of my Florida colleagues were already there. We nodded to each other but did not speak. Several shops were playing Armed Forces radio, and we all strained our ears when the music got interrupted with a flash bulletin that a Special Forces unit had attempted a POW rescue in North Vietnam during the night and that they found the camp empty. The news bulletin was repeated about every five minutes without any new details.

I bought four rattan stools: two small ones for my twin daughters and two larger ones for my other daughter and son. I also bought a pair of Thai figurines carved out of wood and framed in an attractive background, and a poem, "High Flight," engraved on a wood-mounted brass plaque. I failed to locate the carved wood master navigator's wings that I admired the day before. It just wasn't a good day.

I took another shower after returning to my quarters and finally drifted into a long dreamless sleep.

The Vietnamese Story about the Raid

The story of the raid would not be complete without input from the North Vietnamese. They were surprised and shocked by the bold attempt to free their prisoners and embarrassed by the well-executed invasion of their homeland. They made the following sober admission about the "Son Tay incident" in their official history of the war, which they called "the resistance war against the Americans to save the nation":

> The "Son Tay Incident" provided a severe lesson to us about the spirit of vigilance and combat readiness of our armed forces in the face of the enemy's blatant, foolhardy, and unexpected actions. The landing of commandos to rescue U.S. prisoners of war was unsuccessful because we had moved the prisoners to another location a long time before the raid. However, the fact that American helicopters had been able to land troops at the gates of the Capital without being appropriately punished by our forces had a powerful impact on the Party and command levels of the armed forces and the civilian population.[1]

Initial Reaction to the POW Rescue Raid

At first, the North Vietnamese government officials overreacted to the events of 21 November. Before they could make a correct assessment of what had happened during the night at Son Tay and Haiphong, they were confronted with the early morning heavy bombing attacks of the unrelated Operation Freedom Bait in the southern part of their country. Two new aircraft carriers that had just arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin participated in both operations. They suspected that a major assault on their homeland was taking place, and, in a panic, key government leaders began evacuating from Hanoi. Undisclosed numbers of them were lost when one of the three China-bound aircraft crashed after takeoff.[2]

Typhoon Patsy dampened the intensity of Operation Freedom Bait and gave leaders in Hanoi more time to regroup and correctly reassess their situation. The airborne invasion of Son Tay and the display of naval power over Haiphong was just an attempt to free the POWs. Attacks farther south were retaliatory in nature. They expected some kind of retaliation for their successful downing of U.S. RF-4 reconnaissance aircraft near the Demilitarized Zone, but they were surprised by its initial intensity and timing.

Once the U.S. Department of Defense revealed the story about the prisoner rescue attempt, the raid became a very embarrassing international event for North Vietnam's leaders. It showed them and the rest of the world how vulnerable they were to America's superior resources. The United States demonstrated that it had the means and determination to execute a surgical strike deep inside North Vietnam to free U.S. airmen whose internment was not in compliance with the Geneva Convention on treatment of captive combatants. The POW issue had been a touchy negotiating item at the ongoing Paris peace talks, and the Son Tay raid gave this issue increased worldwide press coverage.

The North Vietnamese military establishment experienced a very rude awakening and had to take immediate steps to address shortcomings in their ability to defend the homeland. In good communist fashion they had to chastise themselves for complacency that theoretically had its roots in less than total commitment to their political ideology:

> This raid provided our air defense–air force troops a profound lesson in many different areas, and especially in preparing for and then implementing plans to combat enemy forces landing from the air deep in our rear areas in North Vietnam. After this incident, the Air Defense–Air Force Service Party Committee and the Air Defense Command conducted self-criticism and directed all headquarters staffs and units to hold sessions to review this experience, to derive lessons learned, to conduct stern self-criticism of each element's performance, and to take concrete corrective action.[3]

In spite of what North Vietnam's military historians published twenty years later about the raid's impact on the population, the regime did not suffer an embarrassing setback at home. Very few local people had known about the presence of American POWs at Son Tay. However, many thousands heard the SAM battle that took place high above their cities. It is

doubtful that people in Hanoi actually hid in their air raid shelters, as was reported to the international press, or that they heard small arms fire in their city's empty streets. The only small arms fire that had taken place was far to the west at Son Tay, and much of it came from the airdropped battle simulators. The population no doubt witnessed the biggest nighttime SAM engagement of the war over Haiphong in the east and toward Son Tay in the west. In the days that followed, people were informed about a barbarous attack against their neighborhood that was successfully repulsed by heroic soldiers. The rest of the country did not get the news about the prisoner rescue attempt and the mock attack against Haiphong. Dang Vuong Hung, the Vietnamese author whose account of the Son Tay raid will be presented in this chapter, makes the following comment about his country's wartime publicity policy: "It also should be added that, because of the wartime conditions, our newspapers and our other media outlets never revealed a single detail about the Son Tay POW raid. Only those cadre whose responsibilities required it were given [a] limited amount of information in accordance with a strict security system."[4]

Press Releases about the Raid

The lack of a coherent explanation of what actually happened at Son Tay and the initial confusion that prevailed among the country's leadership did not deter the North Vietnamese propaganda mill. It did not hamper them from exploiting the two unrelated attacks in soliciting international sympathy for their struggle against the United States. Press dispatches did not distinguish between the nighttime POW rescue attempt at Son Tay and the coincidental start of retaliatory Operation Freedom Bait that took place later on during the early daylight hours. Their dispatches lumped everything together as a major offensive against their homeland.

North Vietnamese propaganda succeeded in getting a considerable jump on the U.S. media. This was due primarily to the news blackout from Saigon and to Washington's initial silence about the POW rescue. Consequently, the world was getting only what was available from North Vietnamese sources until Monday afternoon of 23 November, when U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird presented the Son Tay raid story to the press. Until then the North Vietnam News Agency's propaganda-laced versions of events prevailed in major newspapers throughout the world. Some of them made it to major American newspapers such as the *New*

York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and others. Even though published articles properly identified their sources, these accounts gave the North Vietnamese view of events. Some of these are worth relating.

On the day of the raid North Vietnamese peace negotiators in Paris denounced the American attacks around Hanoi and those in the south as "extremely serious acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" and declared that they would not participate in the next negotiation session scheduled for the following Wednesday, 25 November. The North Vietnamese spokesman declared, "The Nixon Administration must bear full responsibility for acts like those of today."[5]

On 22 November the *New York Times* had a front-page article by Agence France-Presse headlined "Report from Hanoi Says U.S. Bombs Shake City." Its readers learned that on 21 November Hanoi shook from the blast of bombs of an early morning raid that was carried out by the United States. As in earlier days before the bombing pause north of the 19th parallel, the city's loudspeakers blared reports that U.S. planes were operating within thirty miles of the city, and then later the sound of sirens alerted the population that enemy aircraft were penetrating to within twelve miles of their city. At the same time there were attacks aimed at the port of Haiphong or the Red River estuary, the Quang Ninh mine complex, and the Ha Tay and Hoa Binh areas, causing casualties among the civilian population. One report claimed that antiaircraft fire was very dense and that the sounds of automatic weapons fire echoed through the quiet Hanoi streets that were deserted once its people disappeared into air raid shelters. The article did not report why this air raid was accompanied by automatic weapons fire on the streets of Hanoi or how many people perished in these reported attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong. The report also stated that "a prisoner-of-war camp containing captured Americans had been hit by strafing planes and that a number of prisoners were wounded."[6] Nowhere in this, nor in any other story attributed to the North Vietnam News Agency until 26 November, is there an admission that the United States conducted a raid at Son Tay in an attempt to free its prisoners of war.

On 24 November the *New York Times* printed another Agence France-Presse dispatch authored by its correspondent, Joel Henri. A North Vietnamese Army political commissar showed Henri a furrow in a rice field that was plowed by a Navy Shrike missile at Thuy Phuong, a village five miles east of Hanoi. This missile's rear part remained intact, and

its manufacturer's markings were still visible. Another furrow with a marked and intact tail fin was located in a rice field at Tay Mo, about six miles from the city. The third Navy Shrike had apparently exploded in the same area in another rice field. The escorting commissar informed the correspondent that "the Shrike was designed to kill people rather than to destroy equipment and buildings." Henri, as a responsible reporter, took the trouble to find out about the Shrike's wartime purpose and quoted from *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* that this air-to-ground missile was designed for use against radar installations.[7]

This article did not report any civilian casualties even though the North Vietnamese liked to report them for their public opinion effect. They normally did not report soldier casualties, making it appear that America's wartime intent was to inflict harm upon civilian populations. The three Navy pilots who fired the Shrikes during the diversion can be comforted in knowing that even though their air-to-ground missiles missed enemy radar sites, they did not harm any civilians. No one was working in the rice fields around two o'clock in the morning.

It is interesting to note that on the next day the *New York Times* printed a photograph obtained from a Polish source in Warsaw that showed a group of people examining a tail fin of what was reported to be a Shrike missile from an attack on Thuy Phuong and Tay Mo. Then on the following day, from Paris, as reported in a special to the *New York Times,* there was a challenge to Secretary Laird's statement that civilian casualties in the Hanoi-Haiphong area might have been caused by North Vietnamese missiles that fell back to the ground. A Hanoi delegate to the Paris peace talks made the following response to Secretary Laird: "We wonder then why the North Vietnamese missiles are of the Shrike type, one of which bears the number SK42L and another the number SK51L. Let Mr. Laird answer these questions."[8]

On 26 November North Vietnam admitted for the first time that there had been an attempt to rescue POWs. Agence France-Presse reported that the North Vietnamese party newspaper *Nhan Dan* confirmed that the raid had taken place but declined to issue any statement about it. The Associated Press bureau in Hong Kong gave the first civilian casualty statistics. This figure was based on a Hanoi radio report that forty-nine North Vietnamese civilians were killed in Saturday's air raids. This report also stated that "a number of United States prisoners of war had been wounded when United States aircraft fired on a camp in Son Tay."[9]

The Son Tay Raid in North Vietnamese History

Almost thirty years after our attempted rescue of POWs from Son Tay the Vietnamese could read about it in the book *Escape and Missing*, by Dang Vuong Hung. This book is a Vietnam War trilogy. One of its three parts, which takes up 117 pages with numerous photographs, is devoted to the raid. Its author is the assistant editor of the Vietnamese newspaper *An Ninh The Goi* (*World Security*) published in Hanoi. *World Security* is an official publication of Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security, which includes national intelligence, counterintelligence, and police organizations. This wide affiliation suggests that Hung is a Ministry of Public Security employee. He is also a Communist Party loyalist, well connected with the regime. It also suggests that his 2000 rendition of the event is their officially sanctioned version of the Son Tay raid.

The relevant section of Hung's book is entitled "The Truth about the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots." Merle L. Pribbenow, a retired CIA operations officer and Vietnamese linguist who translated Hung's account of the raid for the Son Tay Raid Association, served in Vietnam from 1970 to 1975. He has been translating various Vietnamese wartime documents and helped me to understand the protocol Vietnamese writers and Hung used in documenting their sources and what editorial liberties they practiced in producing fictional dialogues among notable personalities featured in their works. He also explained how they derived their unique spellings for the names of Westerners.

Hung borrowed extensively from Schemmer's book *The Raid* without proper credit. Nevertheless, he produced a surprisingly accurate abstract that covers everything from the conception of the POW rescue plan to the raid's execution. He even followed the same outline as Schemmer's detailed and carefully researched book. As one would expect, his version is laced with politically correct jargon and denunciations of U.S. aggression after certain segments borrowed from Schemmer's text. It begins with the following statement:

> Almost 30 years ago, in late November 1970, the American imperialists sent a large number of helicopters and transport aircraft, escorted and supported by hundreds of combat jet aircraft, to deliver a special task force unit to Son Tay, a location deep inside the territory

of North Vietnam, in an effort to rescue a number of U.S. pilots who had been shot down in the skies over North Vietnam and were being held as prisoners.

The U.S. made extremely extensive and costly preparations for this plan. Very senior officials in the massive war machine of this great super-power took part in the planning for this operation, including Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and CIA Director Richard Helms.[10]

The first chapter of Hung's version of the story is entitled "Uninvited Guests from the Sky." In it he describes various American pilots and uses his unique spelling of their names. Vietnamese writers do not have a standardized method for phonetically rendering Western names. Transliteration conventions vary with individual authors and depend on how they pronounce, or mispronounce, each person's name one syllable at a time. Consequently, the spelling of POW names, as well as those of many others who took part in the whole Son Tay raid operation, is unique to Hung. He rendered the names the way they sounded to him when he applied his own English pronunciation to them. Well-known governmental leaders and people who are frequently mentioned in the media are the exception. The phonetic spelling of their names became standardized with repeated usage. In Hung's text Alvarez becomes Anvare, Richard Paul Keirn is Risoc Pokiec, Risner is Raino, John McCain is Gion Macken, Peter Peterson is Pito Pitoson, Elmo Baker is En Bako, Irby Terrell is Inly Toreo, and everyone else acquires, what would be to a reader of English text, a new and hardly decipherable name. Pribbenow did not have much trouble recognizing the names of the former POWs because Hung described the pilots in the same order as Schemmer. One could follow his text as one would use a theatrical program to learn the names of various actors from the order of their appearance on the stage.

The following questions are the titles of Hung's chapters in "The Truth about the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots":

How Did the Pentagon Detect the Existence of Camp Hope in Son Tay?

How Did Pilots Inform the Pentagon That They Were Being Held at Son Tay?

Did the Americans Build a Second Son Tay Camp in the State of Florida?

Who Would Rescue the U.S. Pilots and How Would They Do It?

And How Did They Train Their Commando Troops?

What Did President Nixon Think and Say before Making the Final Decision?

Why Were the U.S. Pilot POWs Transferred Out of Son Tay Camp before the Raid Took Place?

All these questions are answered with material Hung borrowed from Schemmer's book. His readers must digest fifteen pages of text before he acknowledges for the first and the last time his lone source for the U.S. input to his story. This is how he goes about it:

> Mr. "Bengiamin F. Sommo" [Benjamin Schemmer], a high ranking officer in the Pentagon who was also a journalist and a specialist in researching U.S. military history (the person who collected documents and wrote a rather complete book titled "The Raid" about the raid by U.S. troops into Son Tay), provided the following statistics: Among the 365 "heroes of the American air forces" who had the "honor" of residing at Hoa Lo in Hanoi, the oldest were an Air Force captain and a Navy lieutenant junior grade, each of whom had a wife and two children. As for the rest, their average age was 32, and most of them were in the springtime of their lives. 85% of these pilots had flown more than 15 bombing missions against North Vietnam. This means they had committed more than a few war crimes before fate brought them here to "recuperate."[11]

The last sentence of this quotation is typical of many editorial comments Hung makes from time to time after borrowed passages. As one would expect, there are no references to POW resistance to interrogations and resultant punishments. "Uninvited guests from the sky" received humane treatment during their "recuperative" incarceration. They were out of harm's way and were no longer obligated to commit further crimes against the Vietnamese people. One is also led to believe that the "uninvited guests" were better fed than most people in war-torn North Vietnam, where food was scarce:

> Le Viet Tien, the former Deputy Chief of Public Security for Ha Tay Province, recalls that every American pilot POW in Son Tay's Hope Camp at that time received a daily food allotment of seven dong worth of food a day. This was truly a major effort by our government

> when you realize that a Ha Tay Province Public Security cadre at that time received a daily portion at the collective mess hall of only 0.5 dong worth of food per day and that The Province Public Security Commander received a grand total, including both salary and allotments, of only 115 dong each month. However, although we made great efforts to carry out our humanitarian policy toward U.S. POWs, the camp still lacked all types of amenities for their daily lives.[12]

Hung thus tells his readers that it cost their government fourteen times more to feed an American captive than one of their own soldiers. Only a Vietnamese who endured the food shortages of that period could imagine how lavish the diet of the POWs must have been in comparison to what their troops had to eat in their mess halls.

The Son Tay POW Camp—"Hope Camp"

Hung gives his readers a very good description of the POW camp and of the surrounding community, information that was not available to the raiders or Benjamin Schemmer:

> Son Tay city is located about forty kilometers west of Hanoi. The Americans would never have paid any attention to this beautiful and quiet province capital if it had not been for one small detention camp in the city. That was the Xa Tac Prison Camp, located in the area of Song Con Bridge neighborhood, Van Gia hamlet, Trung Hung village, Son Tay City, Ha Tay province. Initially, this was a reeducation and detention camp for common criminals operated by the Son Tay Province Public Security Office. The camp was of very simple construction, consisting of just a few rows of Level-Four houses covered with red tile roofs and surrounded by a high wall about three meters tall. The camp was located in the middle of a rice field and was surrounded by dikes. In the rainy season Xa Tac was always threatened because if the water rose, it would be flooded. Back then, this area was very empty and there were virtually no families living in the area. To get to Xa Tac from Son Tay city, one had to cross a small bridge across the Tich River. This was the only road, and it was extremely vital from the military defensive standpoint.

> In 1965, after the new province was reestablished, the Xa Tac Prison Camp was administered by Ha Tay Public Security. Some time later, this camp was loaned to the Army and it was used for a very special purpose: to care for several dozen U.S. pilots who were prisoners of war. This use was kept extremely secret. It was so secret that the civilian population around Xa Tac and in Son Tay city at the time were only informed that this was an important "warehouse for military supplies." Soldiers guarded the camp very closely, day and night. People spread rumors, guessing that some very valuable "foreign supplies" were stored in Xa Tac. Extremely tight security regulations were maintained at the camp, security of the type "no one inside was allowed to go out and no one outside was allowed to go in." At night, people occasionally saw tightly enclosed military vehicles driving in and out of the camp to deliver and receive "supplies."
>
> Now this "military supply warehouse" and the "foreign supplies" are no longer a secret. After the signing of the Paris Agreement in 1973, the Vietnamese Government returned several hundred pilot POWs to the Americans. How had they been shot down and captured? In what locations were they held? I know that none of the former POWs have forgotten. The joys and sorrows they experienced, the memories that did not fade caused many of them to tell their stories when they got back home. They wrote memoirs and films were made about them. It was the same with the U.S. pilot POWs who were held in the Son Tay Prison Camp in 1970. This fact has provided the author of this article a great deal of documentation so that he can tell the story to his readers.[13]

According to Hung, the lives of U.S. POWs were quite tranquil. Son Tay's guests were permitted excursions out of their camp. Hope Camp, which was the name Hung preferred to use, was being expanded. This expansion included new surrounding walls, a kitchen and mess hall area, a laundry facility, and houses in which the prisoners would live. The prisoners were allowed to participate in this construction. Baker and number of others were given steel pipes to break up bricks for use in the construction. This gave them an opportunity to communicate. Hung credits Maj. Elmo C. "Mo" Baker with using Morse code to pound out messages by banging on the bricks:

> Baker worked out a way to use these sad, solitary sounds, turning the sound from pounding on the bricks into Morse code signals to pass information and talk to other prisoners. For example, he reported that a group of 20 POWs had just arrived the night before from Heartbreak Hotel. Baker also told the other POWs that communicating in this way, using Morse code, was very good, because the soldiers guarding the camp paid absolutely no attention to this and maybe did not even know about it.[14]

Hung does not explain why it was necessary for the POWs to communicate in this fashion when they supposedly lived under very humane conditions and could gather in organized work parties. There is no mention of restrictions on voice communications. We know that he is mistaken about the use of Morse code. He never mentions the special tap code developed by the POWs to bypass the universally understood Morse code. Nor does he give credit to Baker for being the senior ranking officer of the Opium Den. This is in keeping with North Vietnam's policy of denying the existence of military hierarchy among their captives.

The Rescue Plan Emerges

Hung describes how the Son Tay POWs attempted to communicate with aircraft that flew over North Vietnam. He concedes that it was natural for the POWs to let their comrades know where they were being interned and to encourage rescue efforts. He relates how some occupants of Hope Camp displayed their laundry to form letters that could be identified by photo analysts as signals for rescue, "and in the end, all their efforts were not in vain!"[15]

Hung follows up by giving his readers a very comprehensive account of how the United States learned about these signals and how that led to the decision to plan and execute the rescue attempt. Various individuals, from Noru Colinhbeo (Norm Clinebell) and Giooctho Iulo (George Iles) of Unit 1127 at Fort Belvoir, who discovered the call-for-help code letters, all the way to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, get due credit for their roles in making the raid a reality.

All planning, training, and mission approval sequences of events are recorded just as they are in Schemmer's book. This includes even such events as the briefing that Blackburn, Manor, and Simons gave to Henry

Kissinger in the White House on 8 October 1970. Ben Schemmer's text is: "'You do what you need to do,' Kissinger replied. 'Let us take care of the international impact: we can handle that. No one in the White House is concerned about enemy casualties. Use whatever restraint is appropriate, but whatever force is essential for the most efficient operation.'" Hung has Kissinger saying this to the trio: "'You all do whatever you think is necessary. We will take care of any international complications. No one in the White House is concerned about enemy casualties. You should limit yourselves to just those things that you need, but you should use sufficient force to perform this mission in the most effective way.'" That is very close to a direct copy of Schemmer's text. But Hung often has the people in his narrative speak out. So he adds additional dialogues between individuals in situations where Schemmer did not do so. He sizes up a scene and generates a dialogue he thinks would be appropriate for the occasion. The following "quote" from the 18 November briefing of President Nixon could make one believe that he is quoting from Nixon's Oval Office tapes: "All eyes in the room turned expectantly toward Nixon. The American President was very aware of his great and difficult role at this moment. He raised his head and said slowly, 'Your plan is truly outstanding, and it appears that nothing further needs to be added. I know that everyone is now waiting for the final decision. And I will give you my answer as soon as possible. How much longer can General Manor and his unit wait for a decision without causing additional complications?'"[16]

The Raid's Execution

Hung's text becomes more and more original once it reaches the raid's execution phase. Here we get exposed to the Vietnamese version of what happened at the "Secondary School" and at the POW camp. In order to retain the flavor of his narrative, it is repeated here just as he wrote it:

> It turned out that the helicopter code named "Apple One," carrying Simons' 22-man team, had landed by mistake at a location 400 meters south of the target. The DIA specialists had marked this location on the map as a "high school." (In fact, this facility had formerly been the Son Tay Province Party School. After Ha Tay province was formed, the school had been turned into a rest and recuperation area for cadre.) Before the raid, Simons had reminded the pilots that from

the air this location looked very similar to the target so they had to be extremely careful. Ironically, however, the one who actually made the mistake was veteran pilot "Uocno Britton" [Warner Britton], who was carrying Simons' team. Simons finally recognized the error after the helicopter had landed the team outside the wall and flown away. He had been surprised when he did not hear Dick Meadow's [*sic*] voice over the bullhorn calling to the POWs to lie down to avoid friendly fire and did not hear the sound of gunfire from within the compound. To make sure, Simons ordered his team to blast a hole in the wall and assault the interior of the compound. There, before they pulled back out of the facility, the American commandos committed a barbaric crime: they shot and killed five recuperating cadre as they lay asleep. In five minutes, they destroyed the facility, turning it into a blazing inferno!

Following the plan precisely, after establishing a light command post, Simons hastily sent a group of soldiers to destroy the bridge over the Tich River with explosives. Meanwhile, Syndor's [*sic*] team had destroyed the electrical transformer station and all the nearby electrical poles, cutting off all electrical supply to the POW camp and the surrounding area. Even though it had not been part of the plan, this group of soldiers used explosives to also destroy an irrigation water pumping station nearby. (This was truly the act of aggressors who were professional thieves and saboteurs!)

This was not all they did, however. During their advance, one soldier in Simons' group kicked in a door and charged into one of three scattered civilian homes in the entire area, because he saw that this house still had its lights on. A mother and three small children were sleeping soundly. Awakened by the sound of gunfire, the mother and her children were terrified and quickly crawled under the bed to hide. The American shined a flashlight under the bed and saw them. He savagely pulled the trigger of his assault rifle, emptying an entire magazine of ammunition into the woman and her three children. Mrs. Nguyen Thi An, 48 years old, and her daughter Le Thu Huong, 12 years old, died immediately. Another daughter, 15-year old Le Thu Nga, and a son, nine-year old Le Viet Tuan, were hit by many bullets and severely wounded.

At that same time, after making his calls over the bullhorn, Dick Meadows ordered his team to break the locks and enter every cell. Almost every room was empty. However, in one small room the

> American commandos found six shirtless men in bed asleep. They were soldiers assigned to maintain the prison camp after the American POWs were transferred to another location, and all of them were listed in the category of recovering soldiers (sick, wounded, and recuperating personnel withdrawn from all different locations). This meant that they could not participate in combat operations or work details and so were usually not issued weapons. Meadows commando team opened fire, killing all six of these men, who were completely unarmed![17]

True to North Vietnamese practice of that time period, Hung does not mention any combat, or armed, soldiers as casualties of the raid. He describes two civilian deaths and six unarmed soldiers who were detailed to perform maintenance work in the camp. He published a post-raid photograph of a dead mother and daughter and later ones that show two children who survived their injuries after being attacked while hiding under a bed. They are members of Le Viet Tien's family. At that time Le Viet Tien was the deputy commander of the Ha Tay Province Public Security Office and was not with his family during the raid. According to Hung, he was spending the night at his headquarters. No harm came to another civilian family whose members also hid under their beds. There is no mention of this incident in the debriefing accounts of the raiders.

We do not have reliable documentation on how many soldiers were killed at the Secondary School. We do not even know who they were. The consensus of the Greenleaf members, who encountered them in a brief and violent firefight, is that they appeared to be of non-Vietnamese origin. Hung does not explain how five men could sleep through a helicopter landing, an explosion that breached their compound's wall, and the ensuing barrage of small arms fire. An accompanying photograph on page 315 of his book shows the Den Va (Va Temple) intersection near the school. It has a caption stating that this is where Simons's helicopter landed and that six recuperating cadre were killed at the school. Only five were mentioned earlier in his text. There was no wall on the south side of this facility. Greenleaf men did not have to breach it to engage the suspected non-Vietnamese soldiers who were inside it.

We have good documentation on enemy casualties at the Son Tay camp. During detailed debriefing at Eglin AFB, Blueboy and Redwine members were able to account for each enemy they encountered. They had to step over most of their bodies as they advanced forward and could tell from

exactly which building, door, window, or part of the complex they had emerged. Their tally is forty-two bodies. High-altitude photographs taken the next morning showed numerous trucks and ambulances on the road while the bodies were being moved out. Photos showed a smaller number of victims, but it appeared that the removal was already well under way. There was no truck and ambulance activity at the Secondary School. Apparently that location had a higher priority for cleanup. Not far from the camp was a military training facility. One of the buildings did not have a roof, and the photo showed a classroom of soldiers listening to their instructor.

Hung makes a few factual errors in his account. He uses two dates for the raid. One, 21 September, is incorrect; the other, 21 November, is the right one. The helicopter that landed inside the prison yard was not Apple Two piloted by Herb Kalen, and it was not an HH-53. It was HH-3E Banana. Apple Two's pilot was Jack Allison. He brought in Capt. Dan Turner's Redwine Group with the raid's ground assault commander, Bud Sydnor. The destruction of the electrical transformer and irrigation pumping station and the cutting down of power poles was not a wanton work of "professional thieves and saboteurs." The electrical transformer shack by the canal bridge was damaged by Blackard's element. Our pathfinders knocked down one high-voltage electrical tower and cleared (and probably damaged) the irrigation pumping station. All that was included in the original assault plan. The Tich River bridge (Song Con River bridge) was not blown up as planned or as reported by Hung. There was no time to carry out this part of the mission because the Greenleaf Group's arrival in the area was delayed by landing at the school. The A-1Es dive-bombed the bridge with Rockeyes to keep anyone from coming across it from the north. The photograph on page 296 of Hung's book shows several healthy POWs playing basketball in the Son Tay courtyard. Ralph Gaither, former Son Tay inmate, cannot recognize any of the clearly shown faces or any of the surrounding structures. Obviously that snapshot is from another POW detention facility.

Claims of Warnings about the U.S. Rescue Plans

Hung's chapter "Why Were the U.S. Pilot POWs Transferred Out of Son Tay Camp before the Raid Took Place?" is very interesting even though it does not present a conclusive answer. He begins by presenting the U.S.

conclusion, which is supported by the repatriated POWs. Son Tay camp had to be evacuated because of excessive flooding in the area and the precarious location of the camp on the banks of the swelling Tich (Song Con) River. He attributes the unusual flood conditions to the "artificial rain-making operations that were part of a CIA 'Weather Warfare' program."[18] After that Hung alleges that two individuals claimed that they had warned appropriate authorities about the planned POW rescue raid.

GENERAL NGUYEN DON TU'S CLAIM

The first account comes from Maj. Gen. Nguyen Don Tu, who served as chief of the Research Section of the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks. He alleges that he had alerted his government about a plan to rescue U.S. POWs in the following message: "Information from U.S. Congressional minutes reveals that the enemy has a plan to conduct a raid against the Son Tay Prison Camp to rescue U.S. prisoners of war. Precautions should be taken against this possibility."[19]

The general explains how he reached this important conclusion. It was his job to read and study secret documents provided to the North Vietnamese delegation by progressive American friends. Late in 1970, he came across a document that covered the construction of a mockup of a North Vietnamese POW camp. At first he thought that its purpose was just to demonstrate how the U.S. POWs lived in captivity. But because he knew about the existence of a camp at Son Tay, he began to connect the dots. He soon convinced himself that the reason why so many pages of congressional minutes available to him were censored and exempted was that Congress had been debating the Pentagon's risky plan for a POW rescue operation.

When General Tu returned to Hanoi he learned that the POWs were no longer at Son Tay because the authorities had already received confirmation about the top secret rescue plans even before he dispatched his message about the POW rescue. Nevertheless, he proclaims proudly, "About two weeks later the raid was carried out just as I had predicted."[20]

We all know from Washington's post-raid controversies that the U.S. Congress did not have a clue about the Son Tay rescue plan. General Tu's reference to a POW camp mockup may be connected to some temporary displays of Vietnam War POW facilities that were put up by groups of POW/MIA supporters at the Capitol building. Their presence was addressed in congressional records.

GIA HUY'S CLAIM

The other account comes from Gia Huy, who was a covert intelligence officer working for the Ministry of Public Security. His European assignment was to mix with American anti-war protesters. Some of them would deliver to him printed materials of intelligence value, such as information on the names of Saigon intelligence personnel who were attending training courses in the United States.

He claims that one of his sources was a disgruntled former Defense Intelligence Agency employee who was at that time working as a journalist for a respected U.S. magazine. Huy identifies this man as "R." The two first met at an anti-war conference in Geneva, Switzerland. He claims that he ran into "R" again in Paris in mid-October at a news conference. "R" arranged a brief encounter in a restroom where he passed Huy a piece of paper. Huy read it and quickly flushed it down the toilet. He remembers that it contained the following message: "The U.S. Defense Department is currently making urgent preparations for a raid to be launched into an area northwest of Hanoi to rescue U.S. pilots who are being held as prisoners of war. According to a Vietnamese priest in Belgium, DIA has selected a number of experienced Western European commando officers to take part in this operation."[21]

Huy said he found himself in Brussels the very next day, and he located there a World War II guerrilla fighter who knew that some of his colleagues had gone to work for the U.S. military. This man identified "Phonteng" (Fontaine), a Frenchman born in Belgium, as an individual capable of aiding the United States in carrying out an airborne commando rescue operation. He knew that Fontaine had been involved in some operations in Laos and Vietnam and that he was still working for the Americans. According to Huy, "I decided to quickly send the following report back 'home': 'The enemy may be planning to parachute troops into Vietnam on a raid to rescue American prisoners being held northwest of Hanoi. This report is being submitted for your analysis and evaluation.'"[22]

When Huy returned home he was reportedly decorated for his fine work in Europe and thanked for his information on the POW rescue attempt. He admits that his warning message was not the one that caused the evacuation of Son Tay but says it did fit in with other intelligence reports on the same subject. According to Huy, after weighing all of these reports, the authorities secretly evacuated Son Tay and stationed soldiers there to combat the enemy rescue force. Here is how he puts it: "The evacuation of the American prisoners of war was carried out exactly ac-

cording to plan. As for the unit on permanent combat alert, at first the unit had been very serious in carrying out its mission, but because we did not know the exact date of the raid, after a few weeks of maintaining constant full combat alert our troops dropped their vigilance and turned the camp over to another element. When the enemy did attack the camp the unfortunate incident of which the readers are aware occurred."[23]

DISCLAIMER

Pribbenow did some detective work and located a journalist who fits the general description for "R." This journalist acknowledges that he did meet Huy during the period in question and claims that the account about "R" providing advance information on the Son Tay raid is not true. It is possible that the journalist might have been a model for the character "R" in Huy's story, but the rest of the account involving him has clearly been fabricated. It is virtually unthinkable that any intelligence agency would compromise one of its sources in the manner that Huy did in his attempt to claim a place in history.[24]

The part about Fontaine is partially true. Huy probably obtained his information from the description of Fontaine provided by Ben Schemmer in *The Raid.* Sully Fontaine had a very distinguished past in the Dutch, French, and Belgian underground resistance during World War II and served with distinction in the U.S. Army Special Forces. He might have been in the pool of Bull Simons's lieutenant colonel candidates for the raid. At that time Sully Fontaine was a lieutenant colonel involved in military criminal investigation work on the West Coast in the United States. In order to put the question of Son Tay raid leaks to rest, Brigadier General Blackburn detailed Fontaine to check things out. He had him conduct extensive investigations at home and in Southeast Asia. Schemmer's book revealed Fontaine's unusual quest. He found no evidence that the North Vietnamese were forewarned about the POW rescue raid.[25] Sully Fontaine is a friend of mine, and he confirmed the same to me in person.

The Son Tay Raid in Military Histories

By far, the most straightforward Vietnamese accounts of the raid are found in military histories that Pribbenow has been translating. In his opinion, the following is the best short description of this event:

> On 21 November 1970 the U.S. made a surprise, lightning raid by helicopter on Son Tay City, 32 kilometers west of Hanoi. The goal of this raid was to steal prisoners of war we were holding there. Nixon and Kissinger hoped that a successful raid, which rescued the prisoners, would dampen the anti-war spirit of the American people, who were demanding that their sons and brothers be brought back home, and that it would leave Vietnam with no more negotiating chips it could use in the Paris talks. Although the U.S. preparations were very careful and detailed, the Americans failed to rescue any prisoners. On our side, although we moved the prisoners to another location in time to avoid the raid, we did not fully anticipate the daring nature of the American plan. Because we were not vigilant, we were caught by surprise and did not deploy forces to fight back against the raid.[26]

A very good account of air defense during the raid is found in the history of the Air Defense Service. From it we learn that one listening post heard and reported the flight of our helicopter formation before Cherry One reached the basin of the Black and Red Rivers and that reports on activity in the vicinity of Son Tay could not be passed on to the Air Defense Command because the raiders had cut the telephone lines. We also get a confirmation that the North Vietnamese did not launch any MIGs on the night of the raid:

> As the entire Air Defense–Air Force Service worked feverishly to carry out its three strategic missions and to prepare for the 1970–1971 dry season, Nixon and his advisors were also making urgent preparations to carry out their "Kingpin" operation to rescue American pilots from the prison camp at Son Tay. This raid was carried out from 2:08 until 3:30 A.M. on the morning of 21 November 1970.
>
> Prior to sending helicopters to land and steal the pilots being held at Son Tay, the enemy sent flights of aircraft to operate off the coast of Haiphong and dropped illumination flares in the areas of Van Hoa and Long Chau islands as a deception operation to divert the attention of our air defense forces.
>
> Then many flights of jet aircraft flew in from the southwest at medium altitude and began to circle in areas west and northwest of Hanoi. These aircraft were performing escort and support missions while at the same time were a diversion to distract the attention of

our air defense forces. While this was going on, a number of groups of helicopters flew in toward Son Tay at extremely low altitude. Our visual observation station at Suoi Rut identified the sound of their engines and quickly reported this fact to command headquarters at all levels.

At the 361st Air Defense Division, after receiving the reports of enemy activity, Deputy Division Commander Dinh Dinh Sanh ordered the entire division to Condition One on an immediate basis. This was done at 2:18 A.M. At 2:26 A.M., the entire division was ready for battle. The quickest unit to reach combat-ready status was the 43rd Battalion of the 263rd Missile Regiment, which shifted to the higher status using an abbreviated checklist procedure. The slowest unit to reach combat-ready status was 78th Battalion of the 257th Missile Regiment.

After completing the shift to combat-ready status, the B1 net showed that enemy aircraft had closed to within 30 kilometers of Hanoi. The commanders of the missile regiments provided target data to their number 2 radars [the missile guidance radars] to search for targets, but the range was very long for the missiles deployed to defend Hanoi and the aircraft were flying low along the Vien Nam and Ba Vi mountain ranges, so there was limited capability for launching missiles. 43rd Battalion detected a target at a range of 25 kilometers. 44th Battalion detected a target at a range of 27 kilometers. Then 63rd and 64th Battalions of the 236th Missile Regiment and 41st Battalion of the 263rd Missile Regiment each detected targets at ranges of more than 20 kilometers, but the target flight parameters from the firing position were too great, so the units did not launch. The 194th and 198th Batteries of the 260th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment also detected targets at ranges of more than 20 kilometers.

At 2:39 A.M., the 43rd Battalion/263rd Missile Regiment launched two missiles, shooting down one enemy aircraft. At 2:52 A.M., 44th Battalion launched one missile that destroyed another enemy aircraft.

The 41st Battalion/263rd Missile Regiment picked up a target at long range. The signal was very clear and the target was flying toward Son Tay. The conditions were correct for launching a missile, but the battalion commander believed the target was one of our own aircraft, so he did not fire. A short time later, the unit again detected

a target at a range of 32 kilometers, and the firing data indicated an engagement was possible, but the unit picked up the signal of an enemy Shrike missile at long range and decided not to engage, thereby missing its chance to destroy the enemy.

The Air Defense Officers Academy and the Hoa Lac Airfield both detected unidentified helicopters but were unable to report this fact to the Air Defense Command because the telephone lines had been cut by enemy forces on the ground, and the radios were not up because no radio contact was scheduled at that particular time.

At the 53rd Battalion/267th Missile Regiment, the soldier standing watch on the radio relay fell asleep, and the regiment had to send someone out to the battalion in an automobile to issue the combat order, so the unit was 58 minutes late in reaching combat-ready status.

The 63rd, 64th, and 94th Battalions all were able to lock onto targets and launch missiles, but for technical reasons, these engagements were unsuccessful.

Although we managed to shoot down two enemy aircraft (and one helicopter crashed after its rotor hit an electrical power line while landing), our air defense forces allowed six low-flying enemy helicopters to raid the detention camp for enemy pilots at Son Tay. (Footnote: The enemy did not manage to rescue any pilots because we had previously evacuated the pilots being held at this camp). This was a severe shortcoming on the part of our air defense–air force troops.

The primary reason for this shortcoming was a low spirit of combat readiness and our failure to anticipate that the enemy would use helicopters supported by fighters to make such a deep penetration into our rear area to rescue their pilots. It was for this reason that, when the situation developed, our commanders at all levels reacted passively and clumsily to engage enemy forces in the air, and we had no specific plan to engage enemy forces on the ground. Our commanders lacked flexibility in their handling of the situation; we did not utilize our air force fighters to engage the enemy; our communications arrangements proved to be weak; our combat effectiveness was low; and we failed to shoot down any enemy aircraft on the spot.[27]

The following quotation from Brigadier General Manor's report, which is based on crew debriefings and tape-recorded electronic transmissions,

shows how straightforward the enemy's report on the SAM battle is. Manor's report is in ZULU time, which is seven hours ahead of Hanoi's local time. It uses different names and numbers to identify the North Vietnamese missile battalions, and also refers to the F-105s as G models. All Wild Weasels were still F models at the time of the raid.

> From 1904Z until 1924Z [2:04 A.M. until 2:24 A.M. local time], the NVN Air Defense System was in the process of increasing alert and establishing targets. At approximately 1924Z the SAM/AAA Radar Systems (Firecan/Fansong/Spoonrest) became active. However, the sites along the north through southwest edge of Hanoi showed no evidence of missiles "hot" at this time. These were the sites which subsequently engaged the F-105Gs. By 1913Z, when two F-105Gs fired the first two Shrikes, the hostile environment consisted of two Firecans (AAA) and four Fansong (SAM). During the next six minutes, the number of Fansong radars active increased to seven, with four south at the Red River and three to the north. By this time, at least four battalions were "hot" (VN-271, 002, 019, and 159) and began launching their missiles. The primary radar targeting data apparently was supplied to the SAM regional headquarters by the Phuc Yen and Ha Dong Flatface (low altitude, high resolution acquisition) radars. At approximately 1938Z the battalions at VN-002 and VN-019 and probably VN-159 launched two missiles each, with one of VN-019's (or VN-159's) damaging Firebird 03.
>
> At approximately 1940Z the SAM battalion in the Phuc Yen area and VN-159 went missiles "hot" and activated their AAA (57–85 mm). At this time VN-271 launched two missiles, again at the tight racetrack orbits of four F-105Gs. During the next two minutes the battalions at VN-019 and VN-234 each launched a single missile (for a total of eight to ten missiles fired in six minutes, probably all at F-105s).
>
> During the next five minutes (1942Z–1947Z), as the assault helicopters were departing the objective, four missiles were launched at F-105Gs (two each from VN-159 and VN 234). One of the missiles from VN-159 damaged F-105G Firebird 05's fuel tanks causing bailout over Laos near Channel 108.[28]

The Vietnamese Air Defense Service account of SAM launchings gives one the impression that they were very selective in picking their targets

and did not fire their SAMs indiscriminately. That was not so. They had eight high-flying American jets as targets for the duration of the raid. Four Wild Weasels flew well-spaced figure-8 orbits that had at least one aircraft headed in the general direction of each one of their missile acquisition radars at all times. This made them very gun shy until they fired off some SAMs, which caused the Weasels to break out of their self-protective pattern. The figure 8 was never reestablished after the aircraft began to dodge the missiles. Our four F-4Ds were in two separate orbits and had only passive defensive electronic equipment to tell them when the SAM radars began to track them.

Late in 2008, Mr. Pribbenow sent me a portion of his translation of *History of the Army Security Department*, which was published by the People's Army Publishing House in 2003. It offers a very logical reason why the Son Tay POW camp was evacuated in the summer of 1970.

> The effort to guard against possible enemy airborne raids aimed at rescuing the airmen demanded that we keep the location of the various detention facilities absolutely secret and that we select locations for these facilities that would make it difficult for the enemy to carry out any such plan.
>
> Acting on a recommendation made by the Army Security Department, the Ministry of Defense issued regulations to prevent any unauthorized personnel from finding out about how the American airmen were handled and from making contact with the American airmen. The regulations specified that the captured airmen were to be dispersed to many different locations rather than being concentrated in one location, and that the locations where they were detained should be changed constantly. Whenever we arranged for the airmen to have contacts with visiting delegations of international guests, we would arrange for these contacts to occur at a location outside the detention camp to guard against enemy intelligence-gathering activities.
>
> As we constantly closely followed the situation and the enemy's activities, in early 1970 we detected a number of indications that the U.S. was developing a plan to rescue a number of captured American airmen. Greater attention was immediately focused on the work of ensuring the security and safety of the detention camps. After inspecting the situation, we learned that a number of the detention camps were not truly secure; one of these camps was the one near

Son Tay City. The Security Department recommended that the airmen being held there should be moved to another location that was more secure. The Department's recommendation was approved by higher authority.

Just as we had predicted, on the night of 20 November 1970 the U.S. launched a surprise airborne raid aimed at rescuing airmen being held prisoner in the detention camp near Son Tay City. But the enemy was "too late." Their plan failed; they failed to "steal" even one of the captured airmen, because all of the airmen held at this camp had been moved to another location six months earlier. The enemy raid was a lesson that alerted those agencies and units responsible for administering and detaining this special category of prisoner to the need to constantly maintain a high level of vigilance.

After the enemy raid near Son Tay City, the Army Security Department recommended that the Ministry of Defense build a prison camp for the American airmen at a location in the northern mountain area along the border between Lang Son and Cao Bang provinces. This prison camp was heavily guarded and its security and secrecy were preserved until 1973, when the Paris Agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam was signed. At that time we moved the prisoners being held in this location back to Hanoi to be returned to the Americans.[29]

This is probably a true account of what happened to the POW camp at Son Tay. POW rescue is always a possibility in any conflict, and those holding captives must be aware of this fact. The North Vietnamese learned the same thing that we did in selecting our target camp: Son Tay Camp was the most vulnerable one. We can question the comment about their 1970 "indications that the U.S. was developing a plan to rescue a number of captured American airmen." They do not discuss any of these indications, which might have been based only on some intensified calls from the POW/MIA families and other concerned agencies to do something about the plight of the American captives. We have not yet uncovered a single verifiable clue that the North Vietnamese became aware of a plan to raid a POW camp in their homeland.

Their boast about predicting a raid—"Just as we had predicted, on the night of 20 November 1970 . . ."—is just that. Had they anticipated a raid on their most vulnerable camp, they would have prepared for it by setting a trap for the raiders. We know that this did not happen.

The last quoted paragraph addresses the newest POW camp that became known as Dog Patch. Here the North Vietnamese took advantage of our self-imposed 20 nautical mile buffer zone along the Chinese border that our aircraft had to avoid. We had a similar forbidden buffer zone in Europe along the length of the Iron Curtain. Our aircraft were prohibited from operating or even inadvertently drifting inside this air space that we so willingly forfeited to our enemies. There were threats of career-ending penalties for pilots who violated these forbidden 20-mile buffer zones. We feared to provoke their air defenses and hoped to avoid consequences of their actions against such intruders. Once I had to redo a flight plan for an air drop resupply mission on the edge of the Chinese buffer zone because a reviewer at MACSOG in Saigon was concerned that our aircraft could drift inside the zone during the post-drop acceleration turn to an escape heading. I had to change the approach heading to the drop zone to eliminate the possibility of such turning-over flight. No wonder the North Vietnamese used this to their advantage. The buffer zone we created ensured that we did not get any low-altitude photographs of this new camp. Mike McGrath reported that in 1971, 208 POWs were moved there from the overcrowded Hanoi Hilton.

Accounts from Captured North Vietnamese Soldiers

The most amazing account about the Son Tay raid that I found is in a declassified CIA memorandum for Lt. General Donald V. Bennett, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). It contains a Saigon office report from 7–10 January, 1972 whose subject title is "Reaction of Official North Vietnamese to the November 1970 Raid on the Son Tay Camp and Eyewitness Details on the Episode." Its content is so incredible that I hesitated to use it. But, remembering how Ben Schemmer later regretted not addressing the accounts from Mr. Hung's plagiarized and politicized story about the raid in his later editions of his book, I decided to present it here and let readers judge for themselves. After all, the CIA felt strongly enough about the accounts of the prisoners to pass them on for the attention of the Director of the DIA.

In the first two paragraphs, a source, whose name is deleted, relates that he attended a lecture by a major from the Military Proselyting Department on November 26. This propaganda official informed the attendees about the raid and then elaborated on a visit of foreign correspondents

who were brought to Son Tay one month before. He claimed that the POW camp was created just for the benefit of this delegation and that the prisoners shown there were moved back to their home camp locations, whereupon the make-believe camp at Son Tay was promptly disassembled.

One North Vietnamese corporal, who was captured in September 1971, gave support to this story. He identified the October delegation as being from Canada and related that after the POWs were returned to their home camps, the Son Tay facility became a rehabilitation center for wounded personnel.

The following paragraphs are completely incredible. They come from a captured North Vietnamese soldier whose name is also deleted. If anything, it confirms that captives will create stories to satisfy the curiosities of their interrogators. After all, this is what many of our POWs did in their creatively imaginative quiz sessions. I quote the numbered paragraphs that describe his story. They do not require any additional comment.

> 3. [Name deleted] said he was told by his friend [name deleted] that during the middle of the night on 23 November, many U.S. planes flew over North Vietnam, and the large number of planes caused the North Vietnamese radar frequencies to jam. Around 0200 hours six helicopters flew in at a low altitude along the Red River until they reached Son Tay Town, Son Tay District, Ha Tay Province. Before landing, the helicopters lit up the ground with their floodlights and used loudspeakers to broadcast the following message: "Compatriots, be calm. This is a North Vietnamese Air Force practice exercise." The message was announced in the local Vietnamese dialect and was repeated over and over. Most of the local people accepted this announcement and returned to their homes.
>
> 4. The helicopters landed in the following places, apparently according to a carefully designed plan: two at the schoolyard of the Son Tay women's meeting hall, two in front of the large Son Tay assembly hall, one near a transformer station, and one near the Son Tay confectionery factory. After landing, the Americans rushed in and searched several of the buildings comprising the Son Tay camp, but found no U.S. prisoners, only some wounded North Vietnamese soldiers who were convalescing after returning from South Vietnam. After searching for a short time, the U.S. troops departed.
>
> 5. [Name deleted] stated that a Vietnamese member of the U.S.

landing group, who had reportedly announced the message over the loudspeakers, entered the house of the Son Tay Deputy Public Security Chief, which was located across from the large assembly hall, and shot the Deputy Chief's wife and children. The Deputy Chief was not home at this time. The only survivor was the Deputy Chief's ten-year old son, who claimed he recognized the killer as a man from Son Tay. This boy told his father he knew who the person was, and shortly thereafter the Son Tay Public Security personnel arrested the deputy director of the confectionery factory. (Field Comment: According to [name deleted] his friend said that officials apparently decided that two Vietnamese were involved in the assault—the man in the helicopter who actually participated in its landing, and another man on the ground in Son Tay, who served as an accomplice. After being arrested, the deputy director of the factory did not confess, but he reportedly stated that he "regretted he was not able to finish his job." According to prisoner [name deleted], an unknown person or persons threw a grenade into the house of an NVA major (name unknown), who was the assistant Provisional Public Security Officer of Son Tay Town, killing his wife and small child. [Name deleted] stated that a neighbor by the name of [name deleted], who was the manager of the confectionery factory, shot the major's daughter. [Name deleted] did not connect [name deleted] with the Son Tay landing.)

6. The assault lasted approximately 45 minutes, and few shots were fired in resistance. Neither the Son Tay Town unit nor the Province Administrative Committee realized what had happened; the Americans had cut all telephone, wireless, and radar communications. Their tools, including a mine, hoes, long-handled hooks, and barbed wire cutters, were left behind near the transformer. The 35-kilometer Hanoi-to-Son Tay high voltage line was not energized, and thus the North Vietnamese had no lights to help counter the attack. One of the helicopters, which crashed into a tree on landing and lost a blade, was left behind. It was still fully loaded with guns and ammunition when found near the transformer station.

7. After the departure of the assault group, a tank convoy arrived from Hanoi, and an air raid warning system was put into effect. Unauthorized persons were restricted from the area and a military delegation was sent from Hanoi to investigate the landing. Both government officials and the local people were concerned that such

an assault had occurred so close to Hanoi. All levels of cadre in the area were restricted to their quarters until the investigation was completed. The Ministry of Defense issued an order stating that any plane flying at low altitude with or without lights could be fired upon.[30]

Accounts from the Residents of Son Tay

My book generated some interest among Americans who visited Son Tay and had closer than normal tourist connections with local citizens there. Some of them contacted me and gave me very interesting stories they heard from older residents who remembered the raid. All pleaded with me not to reveal their identities as well as those of their Vietnamese sources. They witnessed the apprehension the people had over contacts with Americans and did not want to do anything that could cause the authorities to question their conduct. As one who has experienced life in a communist country, I fully understand their situation and provide only an overall summary of what they believe to be their truth about the raid.

It is clear that the citizens of Son Tay were not aware of the location of the POW camp on the bank of the Song Con River. The raid exposed this well-kept secret, but even after that the true location of the camp remained shrouded in secrecy. Older citizens that recalled the raid believe that the American airmen had been held in a prison inside the Citadel and were skeptical of the site American visitors identified to them. They also believed that their military had anticipated the rescue attempt and moved the POWs to another prison just east of the Citadel that was still within the city limits. They let the American visitors photograph the gate to this prison and the electrical power station where they claim that a nighttime supervisor turned off the electricity to the city so that the raiders could not find the relocated captives. They also remembered that their electrical clocks stopped just before 2:30 A.M. They heard many low- and high-flying aircraft and the missiles that shot down some of them. One source even recalled that he heard a firefight on the road southeast of the Citadel. He believes that it came from a military encounter with the raiders who were looking for the place where the prisoners had been relocated.

It is astounding how the Vietnamese succeeded in concealing the raid's events from the local population. The destruction of the power line by Redwine's Masten and Strahan was transformed into a heroic act

by an employee of the electrical power plant, and the firefight simulator, dropped by Cherry One, became an actual battle in which the American raiders were repulsed by the North Vietnamese soldiers. No one had seen any American bodies because their unsuccessful comrades retrieved them and managed to escape in the helicopters. No wonder the locals considered the raid stories of their visiting American acquaintances as equally incredible.

I hope that this chapter has some contrasting accounts of an event as it is viewed and interpreted by an opponent in a bitter war.

Army Col. Stephen C. Ball from the U.S. Defense Attaché office in Hanoi presented a copy of Hung's book to the JFK Museum at Fort Bragg. It is there on display with other Son Tay raid memorabilia, along with Pribbenow's translation of the chapter "The Truth about the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots."

Epilogue

Throughout the planning and training for the raid we had remained confident that the bold assault plan would surprise the North Vietnamese. To ensure this surprise, we planned to distract the enemy from focusing on our real objective west of Hanoi by having the U.S. Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin stage a mock attack against Haiphong. The North Vietnamese air defense response evolved exactly the way the intelligence specialists on the planning staff predicted. Almost all of the assumptions that we had made about the enemy reaction to the incursion proved to be correct. Besides the disappointment over not finding any POWs, the raiders encountered only one unplanned event. One helicopter with the Greenleaf Group landed at a military complex that resembled Son Tay but was just south of the targeted POW camp. There they unexpectedly encountered armed soldiers who are to this day believed to have been non-Vietnamese. The superior firepower of our troops quickly subdued them and in so doing might have prevented them from responding to our attack on the POW camp. The air battle scenario went pretty much the way Capt. Jack Knops had predicted, with perhaps one exception. He anticipated SAM launchings much earlier than they actually occurred. Our ground troops were already withdrawing to their helicopters when the first SAMs lit up the night sky.

Vietnamese military histories published after the war were critical of their troops' performance during the raid and confirm our post-raid conclusions about the disarray in their air defenses. Their more recent accounts indicate that the transfer of the POWs from Son Tay was part of a plan to consolidate their captives in facilities that were safer from possible rescue attempts. The raid proved that their concerns were justified; however, they do not offer any proof that they had advance knowledge that Son Tay was or would become a target. They did not embrace the two allegations of warnings that were published in Mr. Hung's book. One would think that the military historians, who were so critical of their own response to the U.S. intrusion into their heartland, would have

seized on anything that would put them in a better light. A revelation that they had moved the POWs out of Son Tay because they had some indication of a probable rescue would have been a positive claim to the effectiveness of their intelligence network.

We learn from the Vietnamese accounts that a listening post in the mountains heard and reported a flight of helicopters heading toward the east.[1] There was no air defense reaction to this up-channel report. This could be because by that time there must have been considerable confusion within the air defense network as a result of the Navy flights from the Gulf of Tonkin and by the high-flying Air Force jets approaching from Laos. The Vietnamese accounts also tell us that military units just south of Son Tay were unable to communicate their reports of low-flying helicopters and aircraft over Son Tay because the raiders had destroyed the telephone lines when they cut down all utility poles outside the compound.[2] Our raiders did not cut down any telephone poles; the telephone lines must have been damaged during one of the A-1E attacks on the Song Con River bridge. There the telephone lines merged into a communications cable that was strung along the western side of the bridge. Our plan called for a separate explosive charge to destroy this cable. No one knew that these telephone lines were connected to the air defense sector. Had the Air Defense Command received telephone reports of low- and slow-flying aircraft that close to Phuc Yen Air Base, they might have launched their two alert MIG interceptors. Since we were jamming their voice communications in our immediate vicinity, the MIG pilots would have lacked clear vectoring commands from their ground controllers and would have been forced to rely on their own airborne radar and airmanship skills to locate our aircraft. That would have added another dimension to the raid's air operations. There is a positive historical comment in their Air Defense Command history confirming that the Vietnamese did not employ their interceptors that night.[3]

It took a very long time to recover from the shattering disappointment over the outcome of the raid. Our diligently prepared mission of mercy seemed to be a devastating failure. Many of us believed that our unsuccessful raid would cause even worse treatment for all the POWs. During our group mission debriefing in his conference room at Eglin AFB, our equally dejected Brigadier General Manor attempted to lift our deflated spirits with some words of encouragement he received from Admiral McCain in Hawaii. He had stopped there with Bull Simons on their hurried return to Washington to face the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the press corps.

McCain told them, "Don't let anyone tell you that this mission was a failure. We will learn, as the results develop, that many benefits will accrue as a result of having done this."[4] Admiral McCain's assessment of what our mission accomplished proved to be correct. But we were not comforted by his wise foresight at that time. As CINCPAC, he had a better perspective on the whole war and foresaw the impact our bold incursion would have upon the enemy. We were simply too closely tied to the painful event and felt too much personal bitterness over our well-executed but presumably wasted effort.

Most of us lived with this perception until we learned from the returning POWs about the immediate changes brought about by our failed rescue attempt. That is when we realized the forgotten secondary objective of our raid: that by freeing a small number of POWs from one camp, we would give hope to all the rest, demonstrating to them that they had not been forgotten. We did not bring home anyone, but we succeeded in giving renewed hope to all. Their startled captors abandoned all dispersed detention camps and herded them into overcrowded facilities in downtown Hanoi. Here they began to enjoy unprecedented fellowship with long-isolated friends. They were able to nurse back to health those who had faced almost certain death in the isolated country camps. Always dedicated and loyal soldiers, they were able to organize and come home as members of the Fourth Allied POW Wing. Their conduct in captivity became an inspiration not only for their colleagues in uniform but also for all Americans who cherish what their country represents.

Periodic reunions between the POWs and the raiders are emotional and memorable events. Their embraces have more than paid back our effort that gave us the unique opportunity to fulfill our soldierly duty by trying to secure their freedom. Now we no longer believe that our raid was a failure. We understand what results it brought. Furthermore, we should not even lament the fact that we could have brought home all those we had expected to find at Son Tay that night. One former Son Tay inmate, retired Navy Cdr. Claude Clower, reminded those members of the Son Tay Raid Association who attended a memorable joint reunion with the NAM/POWs, Inc., in Dayton in 2006 that perhaps their absence from Son Tay was a hidden blessing. He expressed an interesting opinion in a tear-jerking speech at the National Museum of the United States Air Force during the opening ceremony for an exhibit on the Son Tay raid and on the life of U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam. He invited us to consider what kind of reaction a successful rescue of some fifty-seven

POWs from Son Tay could have caused. POW captors in other camps might have reacted angrily and initiated severe reprisals before their central authorities could restore rational order throughout their POW domain. He added that even though the former inmates of Son Tay had to endure two years and three months more of captivity, that extra time was worth it. The startled North Vietnamese instituted immediate changes by consolidating the POWs in Hanoi. Most important was the realization that in spite of what misinformation they had been fed by their captors, their nation cared for them and our raid rekindled their hope for eventual freedom. They all wanted to meet the men who dared to bring some of them home. Their wish, and ours as well, came through when we were all invited to a memorable welcome-home reunion in San Francisco hosted by our most avid supporter, Ross Perot.

There are critics who claim that our extreme emphasis on secrecy was the reason we did not learn in time that the Son Tay prison had been evacuated. I do not dispute that conclusion. We isolated ourselves from the normal intelligence flow to ensure that an increased focus on one POW camp would not generate undue attention to that location. That could have led to a disclosure of our mission. There were high-level officials at the National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency who monitored their channels for any information on Son Tay and the Vietnam POWs. Fresh intelligence from Washington was being provided to us by Major Andraitis and Captain Knops, who made frequent visits to us in Florida. They were from the Headquarters Air Force Intelligence and had access to everything that was available from those agencies. In addition, Manor and Simons made periodic visits to Washington, where they obtained intelligence updates from Blackburn. Our isolation from other sources might have prevented some vital intelligence dots from being properly connected, which would have given our monitors at the three agencies a clearer picture of our target's status.

Many authors who have written about the raid are very critical of what they perceive as a major intelligence failure at the highest levels of government. These authors fail to evaluate the events in Thailand and Washington as they were unfolding during the hours preceding the raid; they speculate today with clear post-mission hindsight. Even Ben Schemmer, who so carefully documented what was happening at the Joint Chiefs of Staff level, came up short in not focusing on the amount of time

that we had to come up with clearer evidence for the absence of POWs at Son Tay.

The pre-raid situation in Thailand was that we had everything ready to go. We had completed all of our training in Florida, and the newly initiated supporting Air Force and Navy units in the war zone were poised to support us. All Southeast Asia airmen who received a briefing on the mission were immediately grounded. They were forbidden to participate in any combat flights until the mission was completed. Those of us who had concerns about the lack of activity at Son Tay in the recent high-altitude photographs of the camp were reassured by fresh photographs Major Andraitis had brought in from Japan. There were definite signs of life inside the compound walls. The only problem was the approaching typhoon. Brigadier General Manor had the option and full authority to delay the mission for about five days or go one day early. At first, he notified the Joint Chiefs in Washington that he was contemplating a delay, but after reviewing the developing weather pattern he opted to go twenty-four hours early. He did not have the up-to-the minute intelligence inputs that were troubling his bosses in Washington. We were all focused on going and getting the job done.

In Thailand we were twelve hours ahead of our bosses in Washington. Their situation was vastly different. In addition to the combat aspects of the rescue operation, they had to contemplate the political implications of what we were about to execute. Then suddenly, on late Thursday afternoon (early Friday morning at Takhli), they received an unexpected bombshell. Ben Schemmer informed us in his book that the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Army Lt. Gen. Donald V. Bennett, had just learned that Son Tay may no longer be an active POW Camp.[5] Earlier that afternoon his staff decoded a message, delivered by a reliable Vietnamese source in a package of cigarettes, that listed North Vietnamese POW camps and numbers of prisoners in them. Son Tay was not on the list. Was this a careless omission by the agent, or had the prisoners been moved to another location? That required further interpretation. The most recent high-altitude SR-71 photographs provided by Major Andraitis showed clearly that the camp had ground activity inside it. Our leaders in Washington were just as relieved by this evidence as we were at Takhli. Bennett's disturbing input caused some agonizing discussions between him, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Moorer, and our own Brigadier General

Blackburn. Bennett favored the just-decoded cigarette message. Others were skeptical. How reliable was this new information? Things could not get worse. In addition, Bennett had to inform them that just before he got the cigarette package news, his agency had intercepted a message from peace activist Cora Weiss that listed eleven more POWs who had died in captivity. Some followup was needed to verify the status of Son Tay. Bennett recalled his key people and had them work on the problem all night.

It was a short night for the top brass in Washington. At about 4:00 A.M. they received a call that Manor had moved up the time of the raid by twenty-four hours. It was already late in the afternoon in Thailand, and the raiding aircraft would begin to take off within six hours. When the Washington leaders convened in the Pentagon, Bennett no longer had a problem with the cigarette message. Early morning information from his staff failed to give him a definitive yes or no on POWs at Son Tay. Everyone—Moorer, Bennett, Blackburn, and Laird—agreed that the raid should go. Laird accepted full responsibility for this decision. Schemmer documents that Laird had dictated a memo for the record on that subject.[6]

None of the critics have considered the time constraints surrounding this decision. If Manor had not advanced the raid by twenty-four hours, there would have been a weather delay of a few days. Such a delay would have given Bennett's Defense Intelligence Agency staff time to check on the reliability of the cigarette message, and all others would have had time to change their minds and cancel the POW rescue operation. As it turned out, the first positive evidence that the Son Tay POWs were gone came when the Blueboy Group reported from the empty prison.

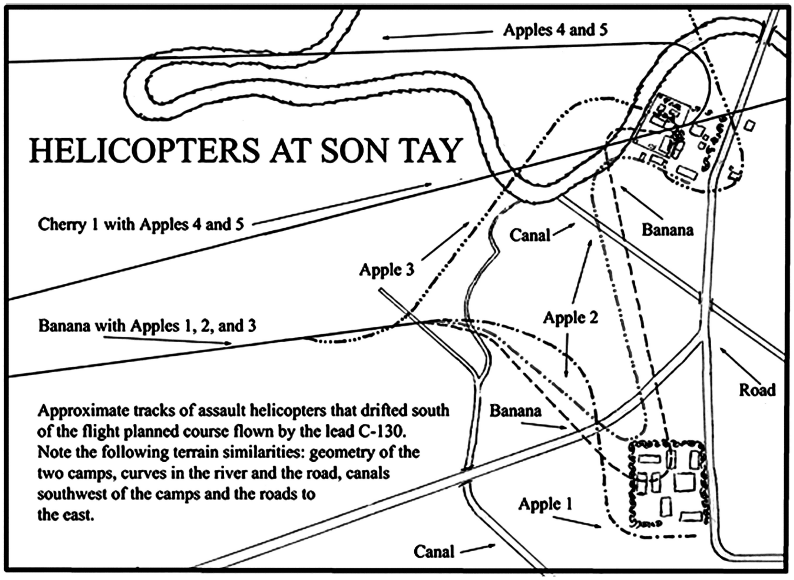
I agree with Mark Amidon, one of the critics of the intelligence shortcomings, who suggests that the leaders in Washington were victims of what he calls "groupthink" and "collective rationalization."[7] They were so motivated and committed to the rescue of the prisoners that their desire for solidarity and unanimity overrode any realistic appraisal of what was facing them. After all, hadn't President Nixon said after being briefed on the rescue mission, "How could anyone not approve this?" Nixon had then said to Moorer, "Tom, I know you guys have worked months on this. I want those POWs home too. Hell, if this works, we could even have them here for Thanksgiving dinner, right here at the White House."[8]

There are also those critics who suggest that the attack on the Secondary School was not an accident but a deliberate action intended to send a

message to its occupants. A television program on the Son Tay raid that aired on the History Channel in November 2005 even suggested that there might have been "a special operations mission inside of a special operation."[9] I would like to answer this unwarranted claim.

I suspect that these critics find some support for their claim in the same statements I obtained from some of the raiders in the Greenleaf Group. After the two-minute warning prior to their anticipated landing they checked their weapons and got ready for the assault. Meanwhile, their helicopter followed Blueboy Group's HH-3E, which made a slow right-hand turn toward the so-called Secondary School. Once this gradual turn was completed, the Son Tay camp was directly behind them and the men could see it through the lowered ramp as they were heading away from it. They missed feeling the gradual turn while preparing for the landing and assumed that their pilot had just flown past the camp that was now clearly in their view. There is no other logical explanation for their observations.

One must question the assumptions critics make about this incident. To this day we do not know whom the raiders encountered at this loca-



This figure shows the tracks of the helicopters arriving at Son Tay. (Sketch by John Gargus)

tion. All that can be agreed on is that the soldiers were not North Vietnamese. Why would our leadership in Washington authorize a risky assault against an unknown third-country enemy at a location that Greenleaf men never trained against? What a dangerous move to undertake! Our ground force conducted more than 170 training sessions in Florida against carefully duplicated targets in the immediate Son Tay area. The school complex was not one of them. Bull Simons was known as a big stickler for preparing his men for every eventuality. It is inconceivable and very insulting to allege that Bull Simons would allow men under his command to undertake a risky adventure into an unknown target area. Finally, if such a devious side mission had been engineered by anyone, I would have been included on it as a mission planner. My colleagues and I had every arrival detail carefully orchestrated down to every second on the clock. The mistaken turn to the Secondary School by three of our helicopters was just a bad navigational error.

We can concede that the raid was allowed to take place because those who had the correct intelligence information were not aware that someone was contemplating a POW rescue. We know that our forces in South Vietnam discovered numerous small jungle camps in which the Viet Cong held their captives. Rescuers dispatched to their locations would always find them empty. Either the enemy was forewarned or the prisoners were relocated to another camp for some other reason. Consequently, reports that this or that suspected POW camp was abandoned might not have rated as intelligence of utmost importance. The same might have been true about the more permanently established camps in North Vietnam, where we knew that prisoners were moved from one camp to another at various intervals. A complete abandonment of a camp in North Vietnam might not have triggered an intelligence alarm for those who came by this information unless they already had knowledge that a POW rescue was being contemplated. Had some more key people within the intelligence community been in on our closely held operation, they might have seen to it that such vital information about relocation of prisoners was passed on to the proper individuals as soon as they came by it. We can only wonder what would have happened under such a scenario. The whole rescue idea might have been abandoned and the trained raiding force disbanded. Perhaps the whole raid effort would have been redirected to another POW camp.

But there is no longer any need to contemplate such things. The Son Tay raid is now part of military history. The valiant rescue effort sent a

powerful message to the whole world. Once the POWs returned, their life in captivity and the change in it as a result of the raid received well-deserved publicity. The world learned that American soldiers were not pushovers—they continued to resist their captors in spite of inhumane treatment and torture. It also served notice to those who would hold U.S. soldiers in captivity in future conflicts that they could not dismiss the likelihood of a daring rescue of American prisoners by their dedicated comrades.

] APPENDIX [

Tabular Lists of Participants, Equipment, and Chronology

Table 1. Army Special Forces Planners

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	FLORIDA	SOUTHEAST ASIA
Brigadier General	Donald D. Blackburn	Chief of SACSA, Pentagon	In charge of POW rescue operation	Coordinated in Saigon (in Washington during the raid).
Colonel	"Ed" E. E. Mayer	SACSA, Chief of Special Operations Division	Coordinator of activities in the Pentagon	Coordinated pre-raid events in Washington.
Colonel	Arthur D. "Bull" Simons	XVIIIth Airborne Corps Supply, Fort Bragg	Deputy JCTG; selected Army Special Forces; supervised planning and training.	Flew in Apple One with Greenleaf Group and was on-the-ground backup for LTC Sydnor
Lieutenant Colonel	James V. Bailey	Signal Officer, Pentagon	Organized radio communications.	Monitored radios at Monkey Mountain
Lieutenant Colonel	Joseph R. "Doc" Cataldo	Hq. DA, Army Surgeon General, Pentagon	Personnel screening and medical planning	Flew in Apple Two with Redwine Group.
Lieutenant Colonel	Bill L. Robinson	Co. D, 6th SFG, Fort Bragg	Planning and training at Duke Field	Flew in USAF Combat Apple over the Gulf.
Lieutenant Colonel	Elliott P. "Bud" Sydnor Jr.	Det. 1, U.S. Army Infantry School, Fort Benning	Designated commander of Army Special Forces	Flew in Apple Two and commanded the ground forces at Son Tay.
Major	Gerald Kilburn	USA JFK Center MA, Fort Bragg	Support Detachment CO in Florida	Deployed to Takhli.

(*continued*)

Table 1. *continued*

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	FLORIDA	SOUTHEAST ASIA
Major	Boyd F. "Sy" Morris	USA JFK Center, Supply, Fort Bragg	SACSA's planning group; supply officer at Duke Field	Remained in Florida.
Major	James H. Morris	7th SFG, Operations, Fort Bragg	SACSA's planning group; operations officer at Duke Field	Monitored the raid at Monkey Mountain.
Major	Max. E. Newman	USAFNTC-USAEAC Security, Pentagon	SACSA's planning group; counterintelligence	Provided security at Takhli.
Captain	Richard J. "Dick" Meadows	Det. 1, U.S. Army Infantry School, Fort Benning	SACSA's planning group; joint planning and training	Flew in Banana and commanded the Blueboy Group at Son Tay.
Captain	Randle L. Smith	USA JFK Center MA, Fort Bragg	Supply officer	Remained in Florida
Sergeant Major	Donald M. Davis	6th SFG Operations, Fort Bragg	Feasibility study, SACSA planning; plans sergeant in Florida	Performed operational duties at Takhli and flew in USAF Combat Apple.
Sergeant Major	Minor B. Pylant	6th SFG, Fort Bragg	Support Detachment sergeant major in Florida	Remained in Florida.
Master Sergeant	William S. Gann	6th SFG Admin. Support, Fort Bragg	SACSA's planning group; administration at Duke Field	Remained in Florida.
Sergeant First Class	Jesse E. Sherrod	6th SFG Admin. Support, Fort Bragg	SACSA's planning group; clerical support	Remained in Florida.

Table 2. "Fruit Salad" Formation Aircraft

AC	Aircraft commander	MN	Map navigator
CP	Copilot	N	Navigator
EWO	Electronic warfare officer	P	Pilot
FE	Flight engineer	PJ	Pararescueman
FN	FLIR navigator	RN	Radar navigator
LM	Loadmaster	RO	Radio operator

AIRCRAFT	CALL SIGN	NAME	CREW	MISSION
MC-130E	Cherry One	Maj. Irl L. Franklin	AC	Lead aircraft for the helicopter formation; dropped flares over the camp and followed up with battle simulators and napalm bomb markers.
		Capt. William A. Guenon	P	
		Capt. Randal D. Custard	CP	
		Capt. Thomas K. Eckhart	RN	
		Capt. Thomas L. Stiles	FN	
		Capt. James F. McKenzie	MN	
		Maj. Thomas L. Mosley	EWO	
		MSgt. Leslie G. Tolman	LM	
		TSgt. Willam A. Kennedy	RO	
		TSgt. Kenneth C. Lightle	FE	
		TSgt. James M Shepard	LM	
		SSgt. Earl D. Parks	FE	
MC-130E	Cherry Two	Lt. Col. Albert P. Blosch	AC	Lead aircraft for the fighter formation; dropped simulators, napalm bomb, and railroad log flare markers; maintained radio monitoring orbit during the raid and assisted in search and rescue of Firebird Five.
		Maj. Harry L. Pannill	P	
		Capt. John M. Connaughton	CP	
		Maj. John Gargus	RN	
		Capt. William D. Stripling	FN	
		Capt. Norman C. Mazurek	MN	
		Capt. David M. Kender	EWO	
		TSgt. Dallas T. Criner	FE	
		TSgt. Billy J. Elliston	LM	
		TSgt. Jimmie O. Riggs	FE	
		TSgt. Paul E. Stierwalt	RO	
		SSgt. Melvin B. D. Gibson	LM	
HC-130P	Lime One	Maj. William J. Kornitzer	AC	Provided helicopter refueling inbound; assumed command of search and rescue (SAR) for Firebird Five.
		Capt. Richard E. Frank	P	
		Maj. Jerry T. Felmley	CP	
		Capt. Charles P. McNeff	N	
		MSgt. Johnie Bomans	FE	
		MSgt. Holley V. Keel	FE	
		SSgt. Aaron Swinson	RO	
		Sgt. Samuel L. Waters	LM	

(*continued*)

Table 2. *continued*

AIRCRAFT	CALL SIGN	NAME	CREW	MISSION
HC-130P	Lime Two	Capt. Clyde O. Westbrook Capt. John H. Pletcher Capt. Bruce J. Host MSgt. Billy E. Gartman MSgt. Lawrence Durbin TSgt. Richard D. Klasser SSgt. Luther F. Hollums	AC P N FE FE RO LM	Provided helicopter refueling backup and refueled outbound HH-53s.
HH-3	Banana	Maj. Herbert D. Kalen Lt. Col. Herbert R. Zehnder TSgt. Leroy M. Wright	P CP FE	Landed in the POW courtyard with Blueboy Assault Group.
HH-53	Apple One	Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton Maj. Alfred C. Montrem MSgt. Harold W. Harvey MSgt. Maurice F. Tasker SSgt. Jon K. Hoberg	P CP PJ FE PJ	Airlifted Greenleaf Support Group.
HH-53	Apple Two	Lt. Col. John V. Allison Maj. Jay M. Strayer TSgt. William E. Lester TSgt. Charlie J. Montgomery SSgt. Randy S. McComb	P CP PJ FE PJ	Airlifted Redwine Security Group.
HH-53	Apple Three	Maj. Frederic M. Donohue Capt. Thomas R. Waldron SSgt. Aaron P. Hodges SSgt. James J. Rogers SSgt. Angus W. Sowell	P CP FE PJ PJ	Gunship that neutralized prison guard positions.
HH-53	Apple Four	Lt. Col. Royal C. Brown Maj. Roy R. Dreibelbis TSgt. Lawrence Wellington SSgt. Wayne L. Fisk SSgt. Donald Labarre	P CP FE PJ PJ	Flare drop backup for Cherry One; rescued Capt. Clarence T. Lowry, backseater of Firebird Five.
HH-53	Apple Five	Maj. Kenneth D. Murphy Capt. William M. McGeorge TSgt. David F. McLeod SSgt. John J. Eldridge SSgt. Daniel E. Galde	P CP FE PJ PJ	Flare drop backup for Cherry One; rescued Maj. Donald W. Kilgus, pilot of Firebird Five.
A-1E	Peach One	Maj. Edwin J. Rhein Maj. John C. Waresh	P CP	Provided air-to-ground fire support over Son Tay POW camp.

(*continued*)

Table 2. *continued*

AIRCRAFT	CALL SIGN	NAME	CREW	MISSION
A-1E	Peach Two	Maj. James R. Gochnauer Capt. Robert M. Senko	P CP	Provided air-to-ground fire support over Son Tay POW camp.
A-1E	Peach Three	Maj. Richard S. Skeels 1st Lt. James C. Paine	P CP	Provided air-to-ground fire support over Son Tay POW camp.
A-1E	Peach Four	Maj. Eustace M. Bunn Capt. Robert H. Skelton	P CP	Provided air-to-ground fire support over Son Tay POW camp.
A-1E	Peach Five	Maj. John C. Squires Capt. William R. Sutton	P CP	Provided air-to-ground fire support over Son Tay POW camp.
UH-1H	Alternate Banana	1st Lt. George W. Williams CWO-2 John J. Ward Sp. 6 Larry C. Boots	P CP FE	Deployed to Takhli as alternate Banana.
UH-1H	Alternate Banana	CWO-2 Ronald J. Exley CWO-2 Jackie H. Keele Sp. 4 Allan H. Wood	P CP FE	Deployed to Takhli as alternate Banana.

CREW MEMBER RANKS:

Lt. Col.	Lieutenant Colonel
Maj.	Major
Capt.	Captain
1st Lt.	First Lieutenant
CWO-2	Chief Warrant Officer (U.S. Army)
MSgt.	Master Sergeant
TSgt.	Technical Sergeant
SSgt.	Staff Sergeant
Sgt.	Sergeant
Sp.	Specialist (U.S. Army)

Table 3. Air Force Planners in Florida

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	FLORIDA	SOUTHEAST ASIA
Brigadier General	LeRoy J. Manor	Commander of USAF Special Operations Forces	Commander of JCTG; planning and training of raider force and coordination with major commands	Coordinated with MACV and Navy Task Force 77; commanded the raid from Monkey Mountain.
Colonel	Norman H. Frisbie	USAF Plans and Policy Directorate	Conducted feasibility study; chaired SACSA's planning group and coordinated between Washington and Eglin AFB.	Alternate commander of JCTG; flew in Combat Apple that monitored the raid from the Gulf.
Lieutenant Colonel	John V. Allison	Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center (ARRTC), Eglin AFB	Air operations planning for the HH-53 helicopters	Flew as pilot of Apple Two with Lt. Col. Sydnor and Capt. Dan Turner's Redwine Group.
Lieutenant Colonel	Albert P. "Friday" Blosch	Det. 2, 1st SOW, Pope AFB	Air operations planning and training for MC-130Es	Flew as aircraft commander of Cherry Two.
Lieutenant Colonel	Warner R. Britton	ARRTC, Eglin AFB	SACSA's feasibility and planning group member and chief air operations planner for helicopters	Flew as pilot of Apple One with Col. Simons and Capt. Udo Walther's Greenleaf Group.
Lieutenant Colonel	Cecil M. Clark	Det. 2, 1st SOW, Pope AFB	Electronic warfare officer planning	Monitored raid from Monkey Mountain TACC.
Lieutenant Colonel	John E. Kennedy	NSA, Pacific Air Defense Analysis facility	Reviewed Eglin air operations plans in Washington for air defense concerns.	Remained in Washington.
Lieutenant Colonel	Benjamin N. Kraljev Jr.	USAF Directorate of Operations, Special Operations Division	SACSA's planning group; in charge of air assets at Eglin; supervised crew training/planning.	Coordinated air support in Saigon, Cam Ranh Bay, Da Nang, and Nakhon Phanom.

(*continued*)

Table 3. *continued*

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	FLORIDA	SOUTHEAST ASIA
Lieutenant Colonel	Lawrence Ropka Jr.	USAF Directorate of Plans, Special Plans Division	SACSA's feasibility and planning group member; coordinated Eglin planning with Washington.	Coordinated base support at Takhli and air support at Korat, U-Tapao, and Udorn.
Lieutenant Colonel	Homer Willett	USAF Directorate of Operations, branch chief for Air Surveillance in the Air Defense Division	SACSA's planner; coordinated with Air Defense Command on availability of College Eye EC-121T radar platforms.	Coordinated on establishing a JCTG command post at Monkey Mountain with communications requirements and radar coverage.
Major	Arthur A. Andraitis	USAF Imagery and Data Management Division of Directorate of Intelligence	Provided planners at Eglin with required en route and objective area photographs.	Flew to Yokota AB to obtain SR-71 photographs.
Major	Richard S. Beyea	USAF Counterintelligence	Shadowed aircrews and ensured mission security.	Secured Takhli buildings needed for the raiders.
Major	Frederic M. Donohue	ARRTC, Eglin AFB	Helicopter planner; trained the gunship crew.	Piloted Apple Three gunship helicopter.
Major	Irl. L. Franklin	7th SOS, Ramstein AB	Air operations planner for MC-130E	Flew as aircraft commander of Cherry One.
Major	John Gargus	Det. 2, 1st SOW, Pope AFB	Radar navigator; formation route planner	Flew as radar navigator in Cherry Two.
Major	Keith R. Grimes	Air University, AC&S College weather specialist and forecaster	SACSA's feasibility and planning group; liaison between Army and Air Force at Eglin AFB	Coordinated on weather forecasting in Saigon and at Takhli; monitored raid from Monkey Mountain.
Major	Herbert D. Kalen	ARRTC, Eglin AFB	HH-3 helicopter planner	Piloted Banana into the POW camp courtyard.

(*continued*)

Table 3. *continued*

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	FLORIDA	SOUTHEAST ASIA
Major	Thomas E. Macomber	Hq. USAF Security	Operational security; arranged for phone monitoring of participants.	Flew in alternate Combat Apple from Okinawa.
Major	Harry L. Pannill	Det. 2, 1st SOW, Pope AFB	Air operations planner for MC-130E	Flew as pilot in Cherry Two.
Major	Richard A. Peshkin	USAF Directorate of Plans	SACSA planner, operations and training officer; planned Southeast Asia deployment with Military Airlift Command.	Managed in-theater C-130 airlift in Thailand and arranged for POW hospital facilities at Udorn.
Major	Edwin J. Rhein Jr.	4407th SOS, 1st SOW, Hurlburt Field	Air operations planner and commander for A-1E fighters	Flew as pilot of Peach One.
Captain	James A. Jacobs	Defense Intelligence Agency	Photo interpreter for the planners in Florida	Provided photography updates at Takhli.
Captain	John H. Knops	Hq. USAF Intelligence	Provided Eglin planners with intelligence on enemy order of battle	Provided the latest intelligence to aircrews at Takhli briefings.
Captain	Norman C. Mazurek	Det. 2, 1st SOW, Pope AFB	Navigator planner for MC-130Es	Flew as map-reading navigator in Cherry Two.
Captain	Thomas L. Stiles	7th SOS, Ramstein AB	FLIR navigator planner for MC-130Es	Flew as FLIR navigator in Cherry One.
First Lieutenant	James A. Brinson	Defense Intelligence Agency (USMC)	Provided Eglin planners with enemy ground order of battle intelligence.	Provided information on enemy strength in the objective area.

Table 4. Air Force Planners in Southeast Asia

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	TAKHLI	MISSION
Lieutenant Colonel	Robert J. Kronebusch	358th TFW, 6010th Wild Weasel Squadron, Korat, Thailand	Chief planner for SAM-suppressing F-105 Wild Weasels	Commanded F-105 Wild Weasels
Lieutenant Colonel	John B. Mulherron	552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing, McClellan AFB, Cal.	Project officer for new EC-121T modification testing and chief College Eye planner	Flew in aborted Frog One.
Lieutenant Colonel	William J. Starkey	358th TFW, 6010th Wild Weasel Squadron, Korat, Thailand	Pilot planner for F-105 Wild Weasels	Flew battle-damaged Firebird Three.
Major	Orville B. Baird	432nd TRW, 555th TFS, Udorn, Thailand	USAF F-4 MIGCAP planner	Flew as the flight lead of the second wave in Falcon Eleven.
Major	Jerry T. Felmley	39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Pilot planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as copilot of Lime One and later as King Twenty-one during rescue over Laos.
Major	William J. Kornitzer Jr.	Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Center, Eglin AFB, Fla.	Instructor in nighttime refueling of helicopters and mission planner	Flew as aircraft commander of Lime One.
Major	Kenneth L. Gardner	432nd TRW, 13th TFS, Udorn, Thailand	USAF F-4 MIGCAP planner	Flew as the flight lead of the first wave in Falcon One.
Major	Lee A. Snowberger	307th Strategic Wing, U-Tapao, Thailand	KC-135 tanker planner	Did not fly on the mission.
Captain	Herbert M. Bomhoff	Korat detachment, 552nd AEW&CW, Korat, Thailand	College Eye weapons controller and mission planner	Flew as weapons controller on aborted Frog One.

(*continued*)

Table 4. *continued*

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	TAKHLI	MISSION
Captain	John L. Cantwell	432nd TRW, 13th TFS, Udorn, Thailand	USAF F-4 MIG-CAP planner	Flew as the flight lead of the second wave in Falcon One.
Captain	Bobby G. Edney	552nd AEW&CW, McClellan AFB, Cal.	College Eye weapons controller and mission planner	Flew as weapons controller in Frog Two.
Captain	Richard E. Frank	39th ARRS, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Pilot planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as pilot of Lime One and later as aircraft commander of King Twenty-one during Firebird Five rescue.
Captain	Nina Gusev	358th TRW Intelligence, Korat, Thailand	Female officer, intelligence planner	Did not fly on the mission.
Captain	Bruce J. Host	39th ARRS, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Navigator planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as navigator in Lime Two.
Captain	Stuart B. McCurdy	432nd TRW, 555th TFS, Udorn, Thailand	Chief F-4 MIG-CAP planner	Flew as MIGCAP mission lead in Falcon Three.
Captain	Charles P. McNeff	39th ARRS, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Navigator planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as navigator in Lime One.
Captain	John H. Pletcher Jr.	39th ARRS, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Pilot planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as copilot in Lime Two.
Captain	Clyde O. Westbrook Jr.	39th ARRS, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Pilot planner for HC-130P tankers	Flew as aircraft commander of Lime Two.
SMSgt.	Dennis H. Van Houdt	AWS First Weather Group, Saigon	Weather forecaster	Provided secret weather inputs.
MSgt.	Loyal E. Ralston	AWS First Weather Group, Saigon	Weather forecaster	Provided secret weather inputs.
Sgt.	Wayne E. Fuiten	AWS Detachment 75	Weather observer	Provided Laotian weather inputs.

Table 5. Navy Planners

RANK	NAME	ORGANIZATION	PLANNING	MISSION
Admiral	John S. McCain III	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC)	Coordinated with commanders in Saigon and gave security guidelines.	Raid monitoring in Hawaii
Vice Admiral	Frederick A. Bardshar	Commander of Task Force 77 in the Gulf of Tonkin	Directed planning for the diversion.	Monitored the raid and diversion from USS *Oriskany.*
Rear Admiral	James D. Ramage	Commander of Carrier Task Group 77 on USS *Oriskany*	Provided his flagship for VADM Bardshar's staff.	Exercised operational control of diversionary forces.
Captain	William M. Campbell	Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) office, Pentagon	SACSA planning staff, liaison with Florida planners, hand carried rescue plans to VADM Bardshar	Deployed to Takhli.
Captain	Allen E. "Boot" Hill	CTF 77 operations officer	Chief planner for the diversion; briefed carrier commanders on diversionary operation.	Monitored the diversion with VADM Bardshar.
Captain	Jack S. Kenyon Sr.	CTF 77 chief of staff	Provided administrative planning support.	Remained at Cubi Point in the Philippines.
Commander	P. D. Hoskins	CTF 77 Intelligence officer	Provided intelligence planning for the diversion; briefed *Oriskany*'s air staff.	Monitored diversion progress from USS *Oriskany.*
Lieutenant Commander	Clair R. Hershey	CNO office in the Pentagon	Coordinated on weapons for A-1Es.	Deployed to Takhli.
Lieutenant	Theodore A. Grabowsky	CNO office, Navy SEAL	SACSA's feasibility study	Did not deploy with JCTG.

Table 6. Navy Carriers and Aircraft

USS *RANGER* (CVA-61)

	NUMBER	TYPE	MISSION
	1	E-1B	Flew as airborne radar platforms for monitoring air traffic and assisting fighters in MIG detection and intercepts; "Uniform" orbit.
	1	KA-3B	Tanker aircraft launched from Da Nang AB.
	2	EKA-3B	Tankers with capability for electronic countermeasures and jamming of enemy radars; launched from Da Nang AB
	2	A-6	Flew as carrier-based tankers.
	2	F-4	Flew target combat air patrol (TARCAP) for Track Bravo and MIGCAP at Station 3.
	4	F-4	Flew as MIGCAP interceptors for Stations 1 and 2.
	4	A-7	Flew rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP).
	5	A-7	Flew as Iron Hand—suppressors of SAM and AAA radars.
	8	A-6	Flew on Track Charlie—simulated mining of Haiphong harbor.
Total	29		

USS *ORISKANY* (CVA-34)

	NUMBER	TYPE	MISSION
	1	E-1B	Flew as airborne radar platform for monitoring air traffic; assisting fighters in MIG detection and intercepts; "Tango" orbit.
	2	EKA-3B	Flew as tankers with capability for electronic countermeasures and jamming of enemy radars; launched from Da Nang AB.
	2	F-8	Flew as barrier combat air patrol (BARCAP) for Air Force C-135 high-flying aircraft—Combat Apple and radio relay.
	4	F-8	Flew force combat air patrol (FORCECAP)—protection of Yankee Station.
	4	A-7	Flew as carrier-based tankers.
	6	A-7	Flew on Track Bravo—flare drops north of Haiphong.
	8	A-7	Flew on Track Alpha—flare drops east of Haiphong.
Total	27		

(*continued*)

Table 6. *continued*

USS *HANCOCK* (CVA-19)

NUMBER	TYPE	MISSION
2	EKA-3B	Flew as tankers with capability for electronic countermeasures and jamming of enemy radars; launched from Da Nang AB.
Total 2		

Note: One EP-3 aircraft, with Big Look long-range electronic surveillance radar, was based in Guam and operated over the Gulf of Tonkin. Total number of Navy aircraft was 59.

Table 7. Air Force Aircraft

NUMBER	TYPE	TAKEOFF BASE	MISSION
1	HH-3E[1]	Udorn, Thailand	Landed with Blueboy inside POW camp.
2	MC-130E[2]	Takhli, Thailand	Flew as lead ships for helicopters and A-1E fighters.
5	HH-53	Udorn, Thailand	Transported Greenleaf and Redwine Groups.
5	A-1E	Nakhon Phanom, Thailand	Provided air-to-ground support for the raid.
2	HC-130P[3]	Udorn, Thailand	Provided refueling for helicopters.
2	EC-121T[4]	Korat, Thailand	Provided AF radar monitoring for the raid.
5	F-105	Korat, Thailand	Provided SAM suppression for the mission.
10	F-4	Udorn, Thailand	Provided MIG combat air patrol.
2	RC-135M	Kadena AB, Okinawa	Flew routine airborne operation monitoring.
1	RC-135	U-Tapao, Thailand	Flew as radio relay aircraft.
12	KC-135	U-Tapao, Thailand	Provided refueling for F-105s and F-4s.
2	HH-53	Udorn, Thailand	Provided SAR response for downed crew.

(*continued*)

Table 7. *continued*

	NUMBER	TYPE	TAKEOFF BASE	MISSION
	4	A-1E	Nakhon Phanom, Thailand	Provided SAR response for downed crew.
	3	C-130	U-Tapao, Thailand	Shuttled raider crews between the bases.
	1	T-39	Tan Son Nhut AB, RVN	Flew command support shuttle
Total	57			

[1]The HH-3E came from the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Da Nang AB, Republic of Vietnam.
[2]One Combat Talon C-130 came from Detachment 2 of the 1st Special Operations Wing at Pope AFB in North Carolina. The other one was from the 15th Air Commando Squadron at Nha Trang AB, Republic of Vietnam. It was used by the raiders in flight training at Eglin AFB.
[3]Two HC-130P tankers came from the 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Cam Rahn Bay AB, Republic of Vietnam.
[4]Two EC-121T radar platforms came from the 552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing at McClellan AFB in California.

Table 8. Blueboy Assault Group

RANK	UNIT / NAME	POSITION	MISSION
	Blueboy Assault Group		Secure the inside of the POW compound, including guard towers, gates, and cell blocks; release and guide rescued POWs to the control point.
	Headquarters Element		Broadcast a rescue message to the POWs; secure the SW guard tower and SW corner of the courtyard; breach an exit hole in the wall and destroy the helicopter.
CPT	Richard J. Meadows	Commander	
MSG	Billy K. Moore	Demo/MACO	
SFC	Anthony Dodge	RTO	
	Action Element #1		Secure NW guard tower; clear and rescue POWs from buildings 5A, 5C, and 5D.
CPT	Dan H. McKinney	Leader	
MSG	Galen C. Kittleson	M-60/Torch	
SFC	Lorenzo O. Robbins	Medic	
SGT	Patrick St. Clair	CAR-15	
	Action Element #2		Clear building 5E and rescue POWs; secure the SE corner of the compound.
CPT	Thomas W. Jaeger	Leader	
SFC	William L. Tapley	Medic/Torch	
SSG	Kenneth E. McMullin	CAR-15	
SSG	Charles G. Erickson	CAR-15	

(*continued*)

Table 8. *continued*

RANK	UNIT / NAME	POSITION	MISSION
	Action Element #3		Clear building 5B and release its POWs; secure the east gate and guard tower with maximum security cell and connect with Greenleaf Element on the outside.
1LT	George W. Petrie	Leader	
MSG	Thomas J. Kemmer	Torch	
SFC	Donald R. Wingrove	Medic	
	Air Force Element		Land HH-3 Banana inside the courtyard and assist in escorting freed POWs through the hole in the SW corner of the wall.
MAJ	Herbert D. Kalen	Pilot	
LTC	Herbert R. Zehnder	Copilot	
TSG	Leroy M. Wright	Engineer	

EXPLANATION OF ACRONYMS:

CAR-15	Colt Assault Rifle-15
LTC	Lieutenant Colonel
MAJ	Major
CPT	Captain
1Lt	First Lieutenant
MACO	Marshaling area control officer
MSG	Master Sergeant
RTO	Radio telephone operator
TSG	Technical Sergeant
SFC	Sergeant First Class
SSG	Staff Sergeant

Table 9. Redwine Security Group

RANK	UNIT/NAME	POSITION	PLANNED MISSION	ACTUAL MISSION
	Ground Force Command Group		Provide command for the ground force freeing the POWs	Activated alternate Plan Green, directed return to the original mission plan, and coordinated exfiltration of ground force from the Son Tay camp area.
LTC	Elliott P. Sydnor Jr.	Commander		
SSG	Paul F. Poole	RTO		
SFC	Marion S. Howell	RTO		
LTC	Joseph R. Cataldo	Doctor		
CPT	James W. McClam	MACO		

(*continued*)

Table 9. *continued*

RANK	UNIT/NAME	POSITION	PLANNED MISSION	ACTUAL MISSION
	Redwine Security Group		Secure the south wall and act as control for evacuating POWs to helicopters.	Assumed alternate plan security tasks along the east wall of the POW compound.
CPT	Daniel D. Turner	Commander		
SGT	Terry L. Buckler	RTO		
	Security Element #1		Clear and secure area and buildings along the south wall of the POW compound.	Same as the original tasking
MSG	Herman Spencer	Leader		
SFC	Joseph M. Murray	M-79 Gun		
SFC	Noe Quezada	M-16 Rifle		
SFC	Jerry W. Hill	Photo		
SSG	Lawrence Young	Torch		
	Security Element #2		Clear the irrigation canal pump house and secure area north of the canal.	Cleared and secured area and buildings east of the compound wall and the east gate.
MSG	Joseph W. Lupyak	Leader		
SFC	Tyrone J. Adderly	M-79 Gun		
SFC	Billy R. Martin	M-60 Gun		
	Security Element #3		Secure the canal road intersection and deny enemy road access to the POW camp area.	Same as the original tasking
SFC	Donald D. Blackard	Leader		
SFC	Gregory T. McGuire	M-79 Gun		
SFC	Freddie D. Doss	M-60 Gun		
	Pathfinder Element		Bring down area power poles and set up helicopter LZs.	Prepared departure LZs and cleared the canal pump house.
SFC	Charles A. Masten	Pathfinder		
SFC	Ronnie Strahan	Pathfinder		

EXPLANATION OF ACRONYMS:

LTC	Lieutenant Colonel
CPT	Captain
MACO	Marshaling area control officer
MSG	Master Sergeant
RTO	Radio telephone operator
SFC	Sergeant First Class
SSG	Staff Sergeant
SGT	Sergeant

Table 10. Greenleaf Support Group

RANK	UNIT/NAME	POSITION	PLANNED MISSION	ACTUAL MISSION
	Alternate Ground Command		Provide backup for the Ground Force.	Same as the original tasking
COL	Arthur D. Simons	JCTG DCO	Command; maintain	
SSG	David S. Nickerson	RTO	contact with JCTG	
SSG	Walter L. Miller	RTO	commander.	
	Greenleaf Support Group		Secure the area north and east of the	Provided timely security for successful withdrawal
CPT	Udo H. Walther	Commander	compound; secure the	from a missed target area
SFC	Salvador M. Suarez	RTO	north to south road and	south of the POW camp;
SFC	Daniel Jurich	Medic	destroy the bridge over	resumed planned mission
SFC	David A. Lawhon Jr.	M-16	the Song Con River.	after landing at the POW
SSG	Robert F. Nelson	Torch		camp.
SGT	Gary D. Keel	Photo		
	Demolition Element		Clear and secure area	Remained in the vicinity
CPT	Glenn R. Rouse	Leader	along the east wall of	of the landing zone and
SFC	Earl Bleacher	Demo #1	the compound, make	provided security for
SFC	Leroy N. Carlson	M-79/RTO	contact with Blueboy	other elements engaged
SFC	Vladimir Jakovenko	M-60	Element at the gate,	with the enemy; resumed
SSG	John E. Rodriguez	Demo #3	move to the bridge over	its tasks in the compound
SGT	Keith R. Medenski	Demo #4	the Song Con River and	area reaching up to the
SGT	Franklin D. Roe	Demo #2	destroy it.	east gate before being
SGT	Marshall A. Thomas	FAG/Medic		recalled for exfiltration.
	Security Element		Clear and secure area	Provided security for the
CPT	Eric. J. Nelson	Leader	east of the compound	Greenleaf Group from the
SFC	Jack G. Joplin	FAG/Medic	along the north to	eastern side of the hostile
SFC	Donald E. Taapken	M-79	south road.	facility; resumed its task
SFC	Richard W. Valentine	M-16		upon arrival at the Son
SSG	Thomas E. Powell	M-60		Tay POW camp.

EXPLANATION OF ACRONYMS:

COL	Colonel
CPT	Captain
FAG	Forward air guide
JCTG	Joint Contingency Task Group
RTO	Radio telephone operator
SFC	Sergeant First Class
SSG	Staff Sergeant
SGT	Sergeant

Table 11. Son Tay Raid Events, 20–21 November 1970

LOCAL TIME	EVENT
5:45 P.M.	T-39 with Brigadier General Manor departs for Da Nang AB.
8:00 P.M.	RC-135M, Combat Apple is on station over the Gulf of Tonkin.
8:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.	Two airlift C-130s transport Green Berets with helicopter and HC-130 tanker crews to Udorn RTAFB. One airlift C-130 transports A-1E pilots to Nakhon Phanom RTAFB.
8:45 P.M.	Manor arrives at the Monkey Mountain Command Post.
10:00 P.M.	EC-121T, Frog One takes off from Korat RTAFB.
10:10 P.M.	EC-121T, Frog Two takes off from Korat RTAFB.
10:25 P.M.	C-130E(I), Cherry Two takes off from Takhli RTAFB.
10:55 P.M.	C-130E(I), Cherry One cannot start #3 engine at Takhli RTAFB.
11:05 P.M. to 3:30 A.M.	U.S. Navy EP-3 Big Look from Guam takes up its position over the Gulf of Tonkin and provides electronic monitoring for operations over North Vietnam.
11:07 P.M.	HC-130Ps, Lime One and Lime Two take off from Udorn RTAFB.
11:17 P.M.	Five HH-53 Apples and HH-3E Banana take off from Udorn.
11:18 P.M.	C-130E(I), Cherry One takes off from Takhli 23 minutes late.
11:44 P.M.	Five A-1E Peaches take off from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB.
12:00 A.M.	RC-135 radio relay from U-Tapao is on station in the Gulf of Tonkin.
12:35 A.M.	Frog One air aborts due to broken fuel line and recovers at Da Nang AB.
12:36 A.M.	Frog Two replaces Frog One as the new airborne radar platform.
12:40 A.M.	Assault Formation refueling begins over Laos.
1:00 A.M. to 1:30 A.M.	USS *Ranger*'s KA-3B tanker takes off from Da Nang AB. Six Navy EKA-3B ECM/tankers take off from Da Nang. Two are from USS Hancock, two from USS Ranger, and two from USS *Oriskany*.
1:00 A.M.	Task Force 77 begins launching aircraft from the Gulf of Tonkin.

(*continued*)

Table 11. *continued*

LOCAL TIME	EVENT
1:00 A.M. to 2:30 A.M.	Twenty-five aircraft take off from the USS *Oriskany:* One E-1B "Tango," AEW radar platform Two F-8 BARCAPs Four F-8 FORCECAPs Four A-7 tankers Six A-7 attack aircraft with flares on Track Bravo Eight A-7 attack aircraft with flares on Track Alpha
1:00 A.M. to 2:30 A.M.	Twenty-six aircraft take off from the USS *Ranger:* One E-1B "Uniform," AEW radar platform Two A-6 tankers Four A-7 RESCAPs Five A-7 Iron Hands Six F-4 MIGCAPs Eight A-6 attack aircraft with flares and chaff on Track Charlie
1:18 A.M.	First wave of five F-4 MIGCAP aircraft takes off from Udorn RTAFB.
1:30 A.M.	First wave of six A-7s from USS *Oriskany* departs on Track Bravo.
1:32 A.M.	Second wave of eight A-7s from USS *Oriskany* departs on Track Alpha.
1:33 A.M.	Frog Two establishes radar-monitoring orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin.
1:45 A.M.	North Vietnam launches first SAMs against the Navy aircraft. Five F-105 Wild Weasels take off from Korat RTAFB.
1:48 A.M.	Second wave of five F-4 MIGCAP aircraft takes off from Udorn RTAFB.
1:52 A.M.	First flares are dropped by A-7s on Track Bravo.
1:56 A.M.	First flares are dropped by A-7s on Track Alpha.
2:03 A.M.	Eight-ship wave of A-6s from USS *Ranger* departs on Track Charlie.
2:08 A.M.	Wild Weasel F-105s arrive in orbit over Son Tay.
2:10 A.M.	First wave of MIGCAP F-4s arrives in orbit over Son Tay.
2:13 A.M.	Assault Formation arrives over the IP.
2:16 A.M.	Strike Formation breaks up abeam of the IP.
2:18 A.M.	Cherry One drops flares over the POW camp at Son Tay. H-hour begins.
2:19 A.M.	Cherry Two reverses course and begins airdrops. Banana with Blueboy lands inside the POW courtyard. Apple One with Greenleaf lands at the "Secondary School."

(*continued*)

Table 11. *continued*

LOCAL TIME	EVENT
2:20 A.M.	Blueboy Elements assault their targets inside the courtyard. Apple Two lands at Son Tay and Sydnor calls for Plan Green. Greenleaf Hq. Element assaults the guard building at the "secondary school."
2:23 A.M.	Blueboy Elements search the POW cells. Greenleaf Element #2 holds position at the road intersection. Greenleaf Element #1 provides fire support for the Hq. Element. Redwine #1 clears building 8D. Redwine #2 clears building 7B. Redwine #4 clears the pump station.
2:24 A.M.	Blueboy Elements find empty POW cells. Redwine #1 clears buildings 4A and 8E. Redwine #3 sets up a roadblock position at the canal bridge. Call goes out for Apple One to extract Greenleaf Group.
2:25 A.M.	AAA radars become active over in the Son Tay area. Cherry Two enters primary radio-monitoring orbit.
2:26 A.M.	Peaches One and Two attack the footbridge to the citadel. Greenleaf Group engaged with enemy prepares for extraction.
2:27 A.M.	Blueboy #1 and #3 report from the courtyard. There are no POWs. Apple One returns to extract Greenleaf from the "secondary school."
2:28 A.M.	SAM radars become active around Son Tay. Blueboy #2 reports no POWs in its area. Sydnor calls to revert to the Basic Plan. Redwine #4 blows up electrical power tower. Apple One brings Greenleaf Group to its landing zone at Son Tay.
2:29 A.M.	A1-E Peaches attack the Song Con River bridge. Greenleaf #1 clears buildings 7B and 8F and links up with Redwine #2. Blueboy Group reports that there are no prisoners at Son Tay.
2:30 A.M.	Redwine #3 engages a road convoy with LAW. Sydnor issues a command to withdraw to the landing zone.
2:32 A.M.	Apple One is called to extract the first departing raiders.
2:33 A.M.	Redwine Element # 2 checks out the pump house. Cherry Two leaves the primary orbit because of Firecan radar tracking.
2:34 A.M.	Redwine Element #2 fires LAW at a road convoy.
2:35 A.M.	North Vietnamese launch first SAMs in the Son Tay area.

(*continued*)

Table 11. *continued*

LOCAL TIME	EVENT
2:37 A.M.	Apple One begins to load the first departing group of raiders.
2:39 A.M.	Cherry Two arrives in the alternate radio-monitoring orbit.
2:40 A.M.	Firebird Three is hit by SAM. Replaced in orbit by Firebird Five. Apple One departs with the first group of raiders.
2:41 A.M.	Apple Two lands to extract the remaining raiders.
2:45 A.M.	Apple Two departs from Son Tay with the remaining raiders.
2:46 A.M.	Firebird Five is hit by SAM.
2:48 A.M.	Apple Three departs from holding area.
2:52 A.M.	HH-3 Banana is destroyed inside the courtyard.
2:55 A.M.	Cherry Two leaves radio-monitoring orbit.
3:17 A.M.	Firebird Five's crew ejects at 090/8 miles from Skyline TACAN.
3:18 A.M.	Udorn's rescue center receives report of downed Firebird crew.
3:20 A.M.	Lime One becomes ARRS King Twenty-one. Mission and call sign change.
3:25 A.M.	40th ARRS Super Jolly Green Giants at Udorn are alerted. 56th SOS Sandys at Nakhon Phanom are alerted.
3:26 A.M. to 3:50 A.M.	Apples Four and Five locate the downed crew, hook up for refueling with Lime Two, and prepare for a rescue pick-up. C-123 Candlestick makes contact with the survivors and remains in control until the arrival of King Twenty-one.
3:27 A.M.	Cherry One enters UHF steer orbit over Laos.
3:50 A.M.	Rescue Jolly Greens and Sandys depart home bases.
4:22 A.M.	Cherry Two enters orbit north of Skyline TACAN.
6:20 A.M.	Apple Four picks up Firebird Five EWO Captain Lowry.
6:28 A.M.	Apple Five picks up Firebird Five pilot Major Kilgus.
Recoveries	All Navy aircraft returned either to their carriers or to Da Nang.
	Fruit Salad aircraft, MIGCAP F-4s, and Wild Weasel F-105s recovered at Udorn for debriefing.
	EC-121T, Frog Two returned to Korat.
	All other Air Force and Navy support aircraft returned safely to their home bases.

(*continued*)

Table 11. *continued*

LOCAL TIME	EVENT
	Rescued Firebird Five crew returned safely to Udorn.
	Raiders and Fruit Salad crews returned to Takhli after debriefing at Udorn.
	C-141 medical evacuation aircraft that came to Udorn to pick up rescued POWs were used to return the raiders from Takhli to Eglin AFB.

Glossary

Armed Forces Comparable Ranks and Abbreviations

COMMISSIONED OFFICERS

ARMY		AIR FORCE		NAVY	
General	GEN	General	Gen	Admiral	ADM
Lieutenant General	LTG	Lieutenant General	Lt Gen	Vice Admiral	VADM
Major General	MG	Major General	Maj Gen	Rear Admiral Upper	RADMU
Brigadier General	BG	Brigadier General	Brig Gen	Rear Admiral Lower	RADML
Colonel	COL	Colonel	Col	Captain	CAPT
Lieutenant Colonel	LTC	Lieutenant Colonel	Lt Col	Commander	CDR
Major	MAJ	Major	Maj	Lieutenant Commander	LCDR
Captain	CPT	Captain	Capt	Lieutenant	LT
First Lieutenant	1LT	First Lieutenant	1st Lt	Lieutenant Junior Grade	LTJG
Second Lieutenant	2LT	Second Lieutenant	2d Lt	Ensign	ENS

WARRANT OFFICERS

ARMY		AIR FORCE		NAVY	
Chief Warrant Officer	CW5	N/A	N/A	Chief Warrant Officer	CWO-4
Chief Warrant Officer	CW4	N/A	N/A	Chief Warrant Officer	CWO-3
Chief Warrant Officer	CW3	N/A	N/A	Chief Warrant Officer	CWO-2
Chief Warrant Officer	CW2	N/A	N/A	Warrant Officer	WO-1
Warrant Officer	WO1	N/A	N/A	N/A	

ENLISTED PERSONNEL

ARMY		AIR FORCE		NAVY	
Command Sergeant Major	CSM	Chief Master Sergeant	CMSgt	Master Chief Petty Officer	MCPO
Sergeant Major	SGM	Senior Master Sergeant	SMSgt	Senior Chief Petty Officer	SCPO
First Sergeant	1SG	Master Sergeant	MSgt	Chief Petty Officer	CPO
Master Sergeant	MSG	Technical Sergeant	TSgt	Petty Officer First Class	PO1
Sergeant First Class	SFC	Staff Sergeant	SSgt	Petty Officer Second Class	PO2
Staff Sergeant	SSG	Senior Airman	SrA	Petty Officer Third Class	PO3
Sergeant	SGT	Airman First Class	A1C	Seaman	Seaman
Corporal	CPL	Airman	Amn	Seaman Apprentice	SA
Specialist	SPC	Airman Basic	AB	Seaman Recruit	SR
Private First Class	PFC				
Private	PV2				
Private	PV1				

Abbreviations for Equipment, Locations, Units, and Objects Associated with the Son Tay Mission

A-1	Propeller-driven, single-engine land- or carrier-based aircraft capable of carrying heavy bomb loads and used by the Navy and the Air Force. In search and rescue it used call sign "Sandy." Five A1-Es with call sign "Peach" provided air-to-ground support for the Son Tay raid.
A-3	Navy twin-engine jet attack aircraft built by McDonnell Douglas; also known as Skywarrior
A-6	Twin-engine Navy attack jet aircraft built by Grumman; also known as Intruder
A-7	Single-engine Navy jet aircraft built by Ling-Temco-Vought; also known as Corsair
AAA	Antiaircraft artillery
AB	Air Base (a term used mostly for facilities outside the United States)
ABCCC	Airborne Command and Control Center
AC	Aircraft commander
ADC	Air Defense Command
AEW	Airborne early warning

AFB	Air Force Base
AFLC	Air Force Logistics Command
AFSC	Air Force Systems Command
Alley Cat	Call sign for ABCCC C-130 aircraft in Southeast Asia
ARRGp	Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group
ARRS	Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service
ARRSq	Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (the letter "q" distinguishes a squadron from the ARR Service)
Banana	Call sign for the HH-3E that landed inside the Son Tay POW camp
Barbara	Code name for the tabletop Son Tay prison mockup
Battle simulator	Custom-built plastic air-droppable container with firecrackers and explosive charges to simulate firefight noise
Blueboy	Code name for the fourteen-man Army Special Forces assault group that landed inside the Son Tay compound
C-123	Twin-engine cargo aircraft built by Fairchild; also known as Provider
C-130	Four-engine turboprop cargo aircraft built by Lockheed; also known as Hercules
C-135	Four-engine jet transport aircraft built by Boeing
C-2A	Twin-engine turboprop cargo aircraft built by Grumman and used as carrier on-board delivery (COD) by the Navy; also known as Greyhound
Candle	Call sign for C-123 flare ships that illuminated targets over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southeast Asia
CAP	Combat Air Patrol
CAR-15	Colt Assault Rifle-15
Catapult	Steam-powered mechanism used to accelerate aircraft taking off from carriers
CATCC	Carrier Air Traffic Control Center
Chaff	Thin strips of aluminum foil or metal that can be ejected from an aircraft to create a target return and confuse/saturate enemy radar.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency

CIC	Combat Information Center on an aircraft carrier
CINC	Commander-in-Chief
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific
CINCPACAF	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Air Forces
COD	Carrier on-board delivery aircraft used for carrying passengers and cargo
College Eye	Air Force radar platform used for monitoring aircraft traffic in Southeast Asia with capability to issue warnings on enemy aircraft and to vector combat air patrols to intercept them.
Combat Apple	Specially equipped Air Force RC-135M aircraft that provided around-the clock monitoring of electronic transmissions over the Gulf of Tonkin.
CSAF	Chief of Staff, Air Force
CVA-19	USS *Hancock*
CVA-34	USS *Oriskany*
CVA-61	USS *Ranger*
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DNIF	Duty not involving flying. Medically incapacitated aircrew members are placed in a temporary DNIF status until cleared by a flight surgeon.
Doppler	Downward-looking radar that tracked aircraft movement over the surface and provided ground speed and track drift data
E-1B	Navy airborne early warning radar platform built by Grumman
EC-121T	Modified College Eye aircraft; also known as Connie
ECM	Electronic countermeasures
EKA-3B	Versatile McDonnell Douglas A-3 used in a dual role as an electronic countermeasures platform and a tanker
ELINT	Electronic intelligence
EP-3	Four-engine turboprop aircraft built by Lockheed; used by the Navy for electronic reconnaissance
EWO	Electronic warfare officer

F-4	Twin-engine jet aircraft built by McDonnell Douglas. Also known as Phantom II, it was used by the Air Force and the Navy.
F-8	Single-engine Navy jet aircraft built by Ling-Temco-Vought; also known as Crusader
F-105	Single-engine Air Force jet fighter-bomber built by Republic Aviation; also known as Thunderchief. Its two-seat version (F-105F) flew surface-to-air suppression missions in Vietnam and during the Son Tay raid.
FAC	Forward air controller
Fansong	Soviet-made radar associated with surface-to-air missile defenses
Firecan	Soviet-made radar associated with antiaircraft artillery
FLIR	Forward looking infrared, a system that uses the infrared spectrum instead of visible light to detect images by their minute surface temperature variations and displays them in a black-and-white television-like presentation.
FM	Frequency modulation
Fulton Recovery System	System designed for retrieval of personnel and packages during slow flight. It employed helium-filled balloons tethered to the cargo on the ground by a long, braided nylon lift line. Specially configured aircraft could intercept the lift line, and the cargo was winched on board the aircraft. MC-130E(I)s that flew in the Son Tay raid had this capability for personnel pick-up.
G force	One G is the force exerted by earth's gravity on a stationary person or object at sea level.
GMT	Greenwich Mean Time
GOT	Gulf of Tonkin
Greenleaf	Twenty-two-man Army Special Forces assault group that provided perimeter defense during the Son Tay raid.
HC-130P	Tanker version of C-130 used in Southeast Asia to refuel helicopters and provide command for search and rescue. Two tankers, call sign "Lime," were used in the Son Tay raid.
HF	High frequency
HH-3E	Twin-engine heavy lift helicopter built by Sikorsky Aircraft, United Technologies Corp., used extensively in Vietnam in

	rescue of downed aircrews; also known as the Jolly Green Giant. One with call sign "Banana" landed with Army Special Forces inside the Son Tay POW camp.
HH-53	Twin-engine helicopter built by Sikorsky. It replaced the smaller and less powerful HH-3 model in Vietnam and acquired the name Super Jolly Green Giant. Five of them, with "Apple" call sign, flew in the Son Tay raid.
HSI	Horizontal situation indicator
IFF	"Identification, Friend or Foe," a system that relies on coded electronic transmissions from aircraft to interrogating surveillance radars so that they can be distinguished from those that may be hostile.
IR	Infrared
IRAN	Aircraft maintenance acronym for "inspection and repair as necessary"
Iron Hand	Navy air-to-surface radar suppression mission aircraft
Ivory Coast	Project code name for the preparatory planning/training phase for the Son Tay POW rescue
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JCTG	Joint Contingency Task Group
JGG	Jolly Green Giant, the nickname for search-and-rescue HH-3E and HH-53 helicopters
KA-3B	The Navy's tanker version of the twin-engine jet attack aircraft A-3 built by McDonnell Douglas; also known as Skywarrior
KC-135	Tanker version of Boeing's C-135 transport aircraft
King	Call sign for HC-130P search-and-rescue airborne command aircraft
Kingpin	Operation Kingpin was the code name for the execution phase of the Son Tay raid.
Knot	Refers to airspeed in nautical miles per hour. Aircraft speeds are given in nautical rather than statute miles (mph).
LAW	Light anti-tank weapon
Lima Site	Temporary landing strip in Laos

LORAN	Long range navigation system
LSO	Landing signal officer on board carriers who monitors and assists pilots during landings
LZ	Landing zone
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MAC	Military Airlift Command
MACSOG	Military Assistance Command, Studies and Observation Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MC-130E(I)	Combat Talon C-130, two of which were used in the Son Tay raid as formation leads for helicopters and A-1E fighters
Medevac	Medical evacuation
MIA	Missing in action
MIG	Russian designation for aircraft designed by Mikoyan and Gurevich
MIG 15	Russian single-engine jet fighter of Korean War vintage
MIG 17	Russian single-engine jet fighter used by North Vietnam
MIG 19	Russian single-engine jet fighter used by North Vietnam
MIG 21	Russian single-engine jet fighter used by North Vietnam
MIGCAP	Anti-MIG Combat Air Patrol
NAM/POWs	Nonprofit veterans organization for returned POWs of the Vietnam War
Napalm	Petroleum jelly firebomb; used by the Son Tay raiders to create long burning fire pools to mark orbit points for supporting aircraft
NAS	Naval Air Station
Nautical mile	Nautical mile (nm), or 6,076 feet. Nautical miles are used in air navigation instead of statute miles, one of which equals 5,280 feet.
NCO	Noncommissioned officer
NMCC	National Military Command Center

NSAR	North search-and-rescue station of a ship in the Gulf of Tonkin. The ship had a tactical air navigation transmitter (TACAN) to serve airborne aircraft.
NTDS	Navy Tactical Data System, which provided real-time display of tactical air operations
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NVN	North Vietnamese, or North Vietnam
NVNAF	North Vietnamese Air Force
OPORD	Operations order
Ordnance	Weapons, ammunition, or other aircraft armament
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces
PACAFLT	Pacific Fleet
PACOM	Pacific Command
PDJ	Plaine des Jarres (Plain of Jars), a strategic military area in central Laos
PIRAZ	Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone, a Gulf of Tonkin ship with call sign "Red Crown" that provided radar coverage and air traffic control for the Navy's Task Force 77
Polar Circle	Interim code name for the planning phase of the POW rescue
POW	Prisoner of war
Ranch Hand	C-123 defoliation and herbicide operation in Vietnam
Raven	U.S. Air Force forward air controllers operating in Laos
RC-135	Radio relay version of C-135 transport aircraft
RC-135M	Specially equipped Air Force aircraft for monitoring and relaying of radio communications. It operated over the Gulf of Tonkin.
Red Crown	Call sign for Navy PIRAZ ship in the Gulf of Tonkin
Redwine	Twenty-man Army Special Forces assault group that secured the immediate area outside the Son Tay prison walls
RESCAP	Rescue Combat Air Patrol
RF-4	Reconnaissance version of the F-4
Rockeye	Cluster bomb used by the A-1Es in support of the Son Tay raid

Route packages	North Vietnam's airspace was divided into seven geographical areas called route packages to avoid duplication and overlapping of air strike coverage between the Air Force and the Navy.
R&R	Rest and recuperation, or time off from wartime duties
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SA-2	Russian-built surface-to-air missile with a range of twenty-five miles that was used by North Vietnam. Thirty-six SA-2s were launched against the Son Tay raid aircraft.
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SACSA	Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, the position held by Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn at the Pentagon when he orchestrated the Son Tay raid
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
Sandy	Call sign for A-1E rescue escort aircraft
SAR	Search and rescue
SARCAP	Search and Rescue Combat Air Patrol
SEA	Southeast Asia
SEAOR	Southeast Asia Operational Requirement
SFG	Special Forces Group
Shrike	Air-to-surface missile used to attack enemy SAM and AAA radars
SOS	Special Operations Squadron
SOW	Special Operations Wing
SR-71	Extremely high- and fast-flying reconnaissance aircraft built by Lockheed that can fly at the upper limits of earth's atmosphere at 2,000 mph and is also known as Blackbird
TA	Terrain avoidance, normally a feature of terrain-following radar that displays obstacles at or above an aircraft's flight level and permits the crew to avoid them in a low-level flight
TAC	Tactical Air Command
TACAIR	Tactical Air

TACAN	Tactical air navigation system
TACC	Tactical Air Control Center
TDY	Temporary duty, or a temporary military assignment to a location away from one's home duty station
TF 77	Naval Task Force 77, which was positioned in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam War
TFG	Tactical Fighter Group
TFR	Terrain-following radar, or integrated special radar with an aircraft navigation system and computer that permits flight at pre-selected low altitudes
TFS	Tactical Fighter Squadron
TFW	Tactical Fighter Wing
TRW	Tactical Reconnaissance Wing
TS	Top secret
UH-1H	Single-engine helicopter built by Bell Helicopter Corp. and used extensively in Southeast Asia. It was the original candidate for "Banana" to fly the assault force to Son Tay. Training flights proved it to be too small and too slow for the task.
UHF	Ultra high frequency
VA	Prefix for a Navy attack squadron, followed by a number
VC	Viet Cong
VF	Prefix for a Navy fighter squadron, followed by a number
VHF	Very high frequency
Wild Weasel	Air Force air-to-surface radar suppression mission aircraft
Yankee Station	Designated surface space in the Gulf of Tonkin that measured one degree of latitude by one degree of longitude (approximately sixty square nautical miles). It was the home of Task Force 77 carriers.

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